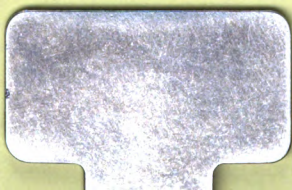




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# JUST AS I AM

*A Nobel*

BY THE AUTHOR OF  
'LADY AUDLEY'S SECRET,'  
ETC. ETC. ETC.

*In Three Volumes*

VOL. I.



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# JUST AS I AM.



## CHAPTER I.

### EVERY DOG HAS HIS DAY.

AN autumn evening, with a biting north wind, and the sun going down redly behind the oaks of Blatchmardean Park. A winding road, with a coppice on one side, and a steep bank topped by a straggling hedge where the blackberry leaves are still green, while the hips and haws offer a feast for the birds, on the other. A desolate bit of road, remote from human habitation ; no glimmer of fire-lit cottage window in the distance ; no gray smoke-wreaths curling up above the wood. It is only a mile and a quarter from here to the village of Austhorpe, yet the belated

traveller might fancy himself far from all possibility of shelter.

A solitary figure cowering under the hedge, with a vagabond dog crouching close at its side, enhances rather than lessens the solitude of the scene. There is something desolate and dreary in that gaunt figure, clad in an old smock frock, patched with such various shades of stuff, as almost to rival Joseph's coat of many colours. The wayfarer is elderly and grim-looking. He has long grizzled hair, and a weather-beaten complexion, hollow cheeks, and haggard eyes. Every line in his rugged face tells of privation that has gone near to famine. The dog has the same gaunt frame and hungry look, as he sits watching his master gnawing a mouldy crust which he has just extracted from the blue cotton handkerchief that holds all his worldly gear.

The hungry master gnaws, and the hungry mongrel envies, wagging his poor stump of a tail ever and anon in mute supplication, once or twice bursting into a tremulous whine. His owner looks at him dubiously, out of a corner of his eye, and at last, with a reluctant air, relinquishes his grip



upon the crust, and tosses the remaining fragment to the cur.

‘A bite for him, and a bite for me,’ growls the vagabond. ‘There ain’t a jail in England where I shouldn’t get a better supper than I can get as a free man. “Liberty’s sweet,” says some folks. Not for starving stomachs, says I. Liberty’s bitter, when it only means you’re free to starve and rot—as we are—eh, Tim?’

Tim stands on end, and licks the wanderer’s face. It is only a dog’s tongue, but the most loving salute Humphrey Vargas is likely to get in this life.

Vargas picks himself up stiffly, for he is sixty years old, and tired and footsore, from the bank where he has been sitting on a cushion of fallen leaves, and begins to look about him in the gray dusk.

‘Why, if it ain’t the blessed spot!’ he exclaims. There’s the pollard oak—and the pool just inside the hedge—and there’s the path across the copse yonder to Blatchmardean. No mistake about it. This is the spot. Twenty year ago, to-day—twenty year ago—and it all comes back to me as if it was

yesterday. I'm not much of a one to remember days and years, but I shall never forget that day, nor that year, nor this place.'

He clambered up the bank, and looked about him, peering through the dusk, across the meadows yonder, with their tangled hedges and tall timber—an old-fashioned picturesque landscape, neither improved nor disfigured by high farming. On the other side of the narrow road—for this village of Austhorpe was off the king's highway, a hamlet approached by rustic lanes—there was only the mysterious darkness of the wood.

'I know that there pollarded oak, and I can swear to that there bit of water,' said Vargas. 'I've seen the place too often in my dreams to forget it when I'm awake. And now, come on, Tim. You and me are going to sleep under a roof to-night. Ah, lad, though I don't know about you. Maybe they'll refuse to take you in, old chap; but we'll try to work it, we'll try to work it, Tim.'

He shouldered his stick, and trudged on resolutely.

'Hardly over a mile,' he muttered to himself, 'I can do that.'

The dog crawled by his side dead lame. Vargas would have been lamer than the cur but for that power of will which made the man a little higher than the dog. The lane was lonely enough for the first half-mile, then came a solitary cottage, on a knoll above the road-way, with its row of beehives against the darkling sky, and its cheerful fire-glow shining across the lane; then a couple of cottages together, little better than hovels, but suggestive of warmth and comfort to the wanderer who had no shelter; then more cottages, four in a row, substantial, respectable dwellings, with a century old date upon their rough-cast front, latticed casements, sloping thatched roofs, with a dormer window in each that looked like an eye under a penthouse brow. Here again was the comfortable fire-glow shining through lattice and half-open door, a glimpse of rustic luxury inside—a neatly swept hearth, a singing kettle, a little round table with cups and saucers, all twinkling in the firelight, and a big brown loaf.

Far away, at the end of a long lane of vanished years, Vargas saw the picture of just such a cottage interior, and himself coming home to it, a respectable

member of society, earning his sixteen shillings a week manfully, and keeping a wife and five children. He remembered the flaxen heads and rosy cheeks in the ruddy light of the wood fire—the snugness of the cottage, at sixpence a week, with a patch of potato ground, and half-a-dozen apple trees behind it.

‘Was that contented, respectable chap *me*?’ he asked himself wonderingly.

Here are the lights of Austhorpe. Not many or brilliant. A feeble ray from the village shop—a glimmer in the schoolhouse windows—a cheery light shining through the red curtain at the ‘Sugar-Loaves Inn,’ where three wooden sugar-loaves, pendent from the sign-post in the road, are swinging in the north-east wind. A light yonder from the lodge window by the gate of Fairview, Sir Everard Courtenay’s place.

Vargas stood and looked up and down the village street—if that could be called a street which was verily a wide open road, with a farmhouse on one side, a few scattered cottages on the other, further on a pond, and half-a-dozen more cottages, culminating in a shop at a corner opposite the schoolhouse, and

beyond that, facing down the road, which here turned off at a sharp angle, the village inn, with its three sugar-loaves groaning and creaking in the wind.

The church, an old stone barn—which looked as if it had been begun without any definite idea, and abandoned by an architect who did not know how to finish it—stood apart in the midst of fields, and had altogether an accidental air.

Vargas knew the place as well as he knew himself, though it was twenty years to-night since he had set foot on that quiet road. He saw that an old cottage or two which he remembered had tumbled down, or disappeared somehow, and that a couple of new cottages had been built. He saw the sugar-loaves swinging as they had swung above his head many a time on summer evenings when he had stood among the village *quid-nuncs* settling the fate of empires. The red curtain had faded a little, perhaps; there was a stout limb lopped from one of the three tall poplars; but the old house had the same air of thrift and prosperity as of yore.



Humphrey Vargas explored the bottom of his breeches pockets with careful fingers, in the faint hope of finding a forgotten penny. But those pockets were positively empty. There was no delusion. Bite nor sup, save from charity or official relief, was not for Humphrey to-night.

‘I’ll do it,’ he muttered to himself between his set teeth. ‘It’s the last move left to me. I shall be locked up for life, but I shall have bread to eat, and a roof to cover me, and my poor old bones won’t ache as they ache to-night. Yes,’ he ejaculated with an oath, ‘I’ll do it.’

He went as far as the ‘Sugar-Loaves,’ crept close up to the window, and peeped in through a crack in the crimson curtain. A man was sitting by the fire smoking a long clay pipe. Two more sat apart at a table drinking beer. A creature who looked little better than a tramp lay asleep, stretched full-length upon a bench by the white-washed wall, but an empty plate and mug on the table beside him showed that he had patronized the house before he took his rest, and a well-filled bundle, which served as a pillow for his touzled

head, indicated his claim to be considered a respectable member of society.

The picture, humble as it was—a sanded floor, deal tables, kitchen fireplace—filled Vargas with envy.

He went in at the open door. The landlord was sitting in his snug bar, reading yesterday's paper.

'Who's the magistrate hereabouts, mate?' asked Vargas.

'You'd better keep out of his way,' answered the landlord. 'He's a mark on tramps.'

'You just keep your advice till you're asked for it,' growled Vargas. 'I want to know the magistrate's name, and where I can find him. That's all I want.'

'I suppose you are going to give yourself in charge,' said the landlord ironically.

'I am.'

'You'd better go and tell that to the marines, my friend. Our magistrate is Sir Everard Courtenay, the owner of Fairview. You will see the lodge gate at the end of the street. There isn't a finer gentleman in the county, nor one that's kinder to his

tenants and servants; but he's as hard as nails when it comes to such cattle as you.'

'I ain't afraid of him,' answered Vargas. 'Oh, I say, landlord, d'ye happen to know anyone as wants a dawg?'

'That depends on circumstances. If the dog's a good bred 'un, handsome, and well edicated, and to be had for nothing, I might find you a customer.'

'The dog ain't handsome, but he's as true as steel,' replied Vargas, 'and you may have him for ——' he was going to say for nothing, but changed his mind—'for a mug of beer.'

And here he held Timothy aloft by the scruff of his neck, and exhibited the cur to the landlord and a friendly loungee.

They both saluted Tim's perfections with a loud guffaw.

'Thank you,' said the landlord. 'I appreciate the offer, but my conscience wouldn't let me rob you of such a valuable specimint. Keep him agen the next dog show; or p'raps the Prince o' Wales might like to continoo the breed.'

'You may chaff,' growled Vargas, 'but you don't

know what you're refusing. There never was such a dog for sense and affection. He's the best house dog in England.'

'Did you ever try him?,' asked the loungee, who considered himself the village wit. 'Had you ever a house?'

'Yes,' snapped Vargas, 'but not so big a one as you ought to okipy.'

'Indeed!'

'The county asylum's about the fit for you, seeing that natur has entitled you to a place in the idiot ward.'

'Thank you,' said the loungee, with an air of saying something crushing. 'If I was the heditor of a comic paper I should ask you to communicate again!'

'Then you won't have the dawg, landlord?,' pleaded Vargas, with a piteous look, first at Tim, and then at the prosperous over-fed host.

'Not unless I had him stuffed for a scarecrow,' said the landlord; 'so now, my man, you'd better sheer off. Customers of your quality ain't in request at the Sugar-Loaves. Their favours is not solicited.'

The man muttered a curse, and turned on his heel.

‘Better in jail than out for such as me—better underground than above it.’

He crawled slowly back again, by the way he had come, to the other end of the village.

## CHAPTER II.

### FATHER AND DAUGHTER.

FAIRVIEW was one of those places which suggest at a glance old-established respectability and a long line of ancestry, a race that has taken deep root in the soil. It was not a grand house, or a show house. It had a snug and even homely air, as of a house meant to withstand the ravages of time and weather rather than to show off its architectural beauty under an Italian sky. It was a Tudor house, with heavy mullioned windows, huge central chimney stacks, and many gables. It was a long, low house, with a broad terrace in front of it, and below the terrace a stiff Italian garden, with a round pond and fountain in the middle, and beyond the garden a fair expanse of undulating green sward, richly timbered. The pond and the fountain were as old as the house and the gold fish that splashed about in the water were popularly supposed to be of the same date, and

to have seen Queen Elizabeth, when she spent a night at Fairview, in one of her royal progresses. There were people of a radical turn of mind who disbelieved in Queen Elizabeth's visit to Fairview ; but there was the old carved oak bedstead, which had been set up for her especial accommodation, and there were the cramoisy satin curtains, faded to a dull brick-dust hue, which had sheltered her august person from the night air.

Time had toned down every colour inside and outside the good old house to mellowest half-tints. Brick and stone had assumed all those varying shades of purple and gray, red and brown, which time and the lichen tribe give to old houses. There had been no restoration or renovation, but all things had been kept in exquisite order from the beginning of time ; for the Courtenays were one of the most respectable families in the county. Nobody had ever been able to say that the Courtenay estate was 'dipped.' No one had ever hinted at an undue felling of timber. The small park, or chase, as Sir Everard preferred to call it, could boast some of the finest trees within fifty miles. The home farm was a model of advanced farming, every cow



a picture, every carthorse worthy of a prize medal. Even the pigs were the aristocracy of the porker tribe.

The Courtenays were not among the wealthiest of the land, but they had never been poor. That was their great merit. From the time when Jasper Courtenay, the lawyer, chosen companion and favourite of Francis Bacon, bought the old monastic lands of Fairview for a song, till this present day, there had been no reprobate or prodigal to tarnish the family shield or to diminish the estate. These Courtenays, a younger branch of a good old Devonian family tree, had thriven and flourished in their Daleshire home. They had married always respectably, sometimes profitably. They had affected the graver professions, and had won fame in the Senate and on the Bench, rather than in the more adventurous careers of soldier or sailor. They had been men of considerable culture, handing down a certain pride and stateliness of mind and mien from sire to son, as if it had been a tangible heritage. They had for the most part married late in life, and had not left large families. And now the race of the Fairview Courtenays had dwindled to two persons,

Sir Everard Courtenay and his only child, Dulcibella, otherwise and always known as Dulcie.

To-night, while the north-east wind was stripping off the ruddy beech leaves, and bending the long level branches of the cedars, the low-ceiled, panelled parlour at the end of the house, looking out upon dark shrubberies, was the picture of homely old-fashioned comfort. It was Dulcie's room, the room where she had studied with governess and masters during the studious period of her life, and where she was now sovereign mistress, free to improve each shining hour, like the bees, or to waste her time, like the butterflies, just as inclination prompted. The old furniture had been enlivened by various modern luxuries and elegancies in accordance with Dulcie's taste. The black oak chimney-piece presented a kaleidoscopic variety of colour. Pots and pans, cups and saucers, and platters of Dulcie's painting or Dulcie's purchasing, gleamed from the sombre old woodwork, enriched with many a garland and festoon by the chisels of dead and gone carvers. There were two old ebony cabinets crowded with toys and crockery of Dulcie's collecting. The chair covers

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were of Dulcie's working, and blossomed all over with woodland and meadow flowers on a drab ground, for she was as dexterous with needle as with pencil. Here, in front of the broad square window, stood Dulcie's piano, a modern antique in ebony and brass, Sir Everard's last New Year's gift to a daughter for whom he deemed nothing too beautiful or too costly. Two pictures, and two only, adorned the dark, dull walls—one the portrait of Dulcie's mother, the other a striking likeness of Sir Everard Courtenay at nine and twenty years of age. He was now fifty.

In front of the wide old fireplace, where the logs were burning merrily, stood a little gimcrack table, and on the table a silver kettle, and quaint Japanese tea service, all red and yellow. Dulcie had been making afternoon tea for her father and a visitor; and now tea was over, and her father was sitting in the big arm-chair on one side of the hearth, with the visitor opposite, while Dulcie herself sat on a low stool in front of the blaze, which glittered and sparkled upon the pale gold of her wavy hair. She sat looking at the fire with her lovely blue eyes, the bluest and sweetest eyes that Morton Blake had ever

looked upon. This was her twentieth birthday, but the girlishness of her slender form, and the childlike innocence of her countenance, gave the impression of extreme youth. A stranger would have thought Dulcie at most sixteen. Her life had been so sheltered and protected, so free from worldly care and all the hard bitter knowledge which worldly care brings with it, that the passing years had left no impression on the fair young face. She was as frank and girlish in mind and manner as she had been seven years ago in her nursery. Time had brought her new graces and accomplishments without taking from her this supreme grace of childlike simplicity.

This was her birthday, and she was spending it quietly and gravely, sitting at the feet of the father who idolized her, and whose love she returned in fullest measure. There was a reason why Dulcie's birthday should never be marked by festivity or rejoicing of any kind. It was the saddest day of the year for Sir Everard Courtenay, for close upon the stroke of midnight on that never-to-be-forgotten twentieth of October, and within an hour of her baby's birth, his young wife had died.

They had been married little more than a year. Lady Courtenay had been one of the belles of the county, the daughter of a duke's younger son, and a bishop's portionless niece, with no fortune but her lovely face and richly gifted nature. Sir Everard had won her against a host of rivals, and he had been an adoring husband. And after little more than a year of wedded happiness, sunshine without a cloud, as those judged who had best known husband and wife, death had snatched her from him, and he had been left alone in a blank and desolate world, for at this time he counted the baby daughter as nothing.

'He will marry again,' said Society, as represented by the parents of marriageable daughters. 'So good-looking and in the prime of life. Of course he will marry again. It would be absolutely sinful if he didn't.'

Sir Everard disappointed Society, and especially the mothers of attractive daughters, by leaving England the day after his wife's funeral. He led a roving life in the wildest part of Europe for the next seven years, while Dulcibella was waxing lovely and sagacious under the care of a married aunt in a fa

away Welsh vicarage ; and then he came home all of a sudden and went to look at his daughter.

She was a childish image of his dead wife, and that set his wounded heart bleeding afresh ; but she was so fair and so loving that he grew by degrees to find comfort in her innocent companionship, and after spending an idle summer among the Welsh hills, whipping romantic waters for trout, reading and brooding in fair solitudes, he said one day—

‘ Dulcie, we’ll go home, and you shall keep house for me, and make my life happy.’

He carried out this plan to the letter. The seven-year-old baby was practically mistress of Fairview. The life he lived was the life Dulcie liked. His garden, his stables, his hothouses, all were regulated to please that girlish fancy. The servants were referred to Dulcie for orders. Dulcie had a governess, and governed the governess. If the child had been of a selfish disposition she would have grown up an execrable tyrant. But as she had a nature of inexhaustible sweetness she only grew preternaturally grave and wise, with a childish old-fashionedness that was delightful. And so she grew, and flourished, and

blossomed under her father's eye, growing nearer to his heart every day, learning every accomplishment that could minister to his pleasure, soothing him when he was weary, amusing him when he was inclined to be gay, reading to him, writing his letters when he was lazy, nursing him when he was ill, more devoted than one wife in a hundred or one daughter in a thousand.

They lived very much by themselves, this father and daughter, mixing in county society only so far as they were obliged. Sir Everard liked to be alone, and Dulcie liked whatever he liked. They went abroad together every summer, and all the rest of the year they lived in the good old house, of which Dulcie never tired. The quiet winter evenings by the fireside, with book, or drawing board, work or music, never wearied her. To be with her father was perfect happiness, and who need seek variety in perfect happiness ?

She and her father had the same tastes, the same inclinations. They both loved art and music, they both had a passion for books.

There were books everywhere at Fairvie w—books

in every variety of rich, and sombre, and delicate binding—Sir Everard and his daughter were connoisseurs in bindings—books in their homely cloth or paper covers, waiting promotion upon merits. Dulcibella had read much and wisely for a young woman of twenty ; but not all the books in the Bodleian would ever have made Dulcie strong-minded or ‘blue.’ Culture left her simple and natural as a child who has never learned its alphabet. Culture with Dulcie meant, verily, sweetness and light.

Of late there had been one very constant visitor at Fairview, a visitor who now ranked almost as a member of the family. This was Morton Blake, of Tangley Manor, who had met Dulcibella two years ago at a flower show and fallen in love with her on the spot. At least this was what he told her six months afterwards, when after meeting her everywhere she went, and calling at Fairview as often as he decently could, he asked her to be his wife.

Dulcie told her father of this offer, and confessed her willingness to accept it, as freely as she had told him her every thought and fancy hitherto ; but for the first time in her life she found that indulgent



father opposed to her. He would not hear of Morton Blake as a husband for his daughter. He had no specific objection to offer to the match. The man was fairly well born, very well bred, good looking, well off. Sir Everard could only say, 'He is not the man I should choose for you. If you wish to please me you will not marry Morton Blake.'

For a daughter who so loved, and had been so beloved, this expression of a father's desire was enough.

'Then I shall not marry him, dear father,' she said, and she never more mentioned Blake's name, though he contrived to force himself upon her presence several times, and urged his suit with passion and persistence. But the father saw his child's cheek grow pale, and her eye hollow. He saw a hundred signs and tokens, not willingly betrayed, of growing unhappiness; and one evening, when they had been sitting by the fire for a long time in pensive silence, he drew Dulcie on to his knee and turned the sweet sad face towards the lamplight.

'My dearest pet, you are unhappy,' he said.

'It's nothing, papa. It will pass away.'

'My own dear love, answer me truly. Does the

happiness of your life hang upon this marriage with Morton Blake ?'

She trembled slightly, and turned deadly pale, but she answered as honestly and fearlessly as she had answered her father's every question hitherto :

'I'm afraid it does, father. I have tried to forget him ; I have tried to put the thought of him out of my life. But I can't do it.'

'Then you shall marry him,' said Sir Everard.

## CHAPTER III.

### AFTER TWENTY YEARS.

‘You shall marry him,’ said Sir Everard ; so Morton and Dulcibella were engaged ; the fair, flower-like girl, and the dark-eyed, grave young man, full of the sense of life’s duties and responsibilities ; a man who from boyhood upwards had taken life earnestly, and had cared little for pleasure.

‘Strange,’ said the honourable Mrs. Aspinall, of Aspinall Towers, who was the leading voice in the chorus of county society. ‘I remember Mr. Blake’s father being among Alice Rothney’s admirers, but Lord George would not hear of such a thing, and the mother was equally opposed to it.’

‘Poor Lady Courtenay,’ sighed Mrs. Aspinall’s visitor, young Mrs. Kibble, a struggling curate’s wife, who only ~~know~~ knew of these great people by hearsay. ‘She was very lovely, was she not ?’

‘Lovely,’ cried Mrs. Aspinall, ‘we don’t see such

beauty now-a-days. These young persons whose photographs obtrude themselves upon us everywhere are mere dolls in comparison. Girls had very little help from dress in my time, Mrs. Kibble. There were no wriggings and twistings of the figure, to show off the set of a train, no side glances under Devonshire hats, no twisting of a handsome throat to sniff a rose pinned on the shoulder, no posturing behind big fans. A young woman's gown was cut straight up and down like a flour sack, she had a bit of lace round her shoulders that was called a bertha, she had a camelia stuck in her hair, and she walked with her feet on the ground instead of balancin' herself upon a three-inch heel, a corn, and a bunion, as girls do now-a-days. Some young women wore pink, and some wore blue, and a great many more wore white. If there was a girl dressed in yaller people stared at her. And that was a ball-room.'

'How uninteresting,' said Mrs. Kibble, who had been plotting and planning for the last week how to do up her cheap black silk with Nottingham lace in the exact style of Mrs. Aspinall's last confection from Worth.

‘And in such a gown as that Alice Rothney was the cynosure of every eye. Yes, Blake was desperately in love with her. He was a widower with three children, belonging to the mercantile classes, only one generation removed from a foundry, not at all the kind of man that Lord George Rothney would be likely to approve of as a husband for his beautiful daughter. There were three daughters I believe, but neither of the sisters could compare with Alice.’

‘Did the young lady care for him?’ asked Mrs Kibble, deeply interested, and gratified that Mrs. Aspinall should condescend to talk so much, her duty calls at the Towers being generally of an up-hill character.

‘Of course not. Alice was an arrant flirt, and knew her own value. She led on Blake, as she led others on, and then accepted Sir Everard Courtenay, and laughed at her admirers. She cared no more for breaking hearts than you care for breaking eggs when you make a pudden’,’ concluded Mrs. Aspinall, taking for granted that the curate’s wife did make puddings.

The Blakes belonged to the mercantile classes.

This no doubt was the reason why Sir Everard Courtenay, who had much pride of race, had opposed his daughter's marriage with Morton. Geoffrey Blake, Morton's grandfather, had made his money at Blackford, the big manufacturing town within thirty miles of Austhorpe. He had come up from the north, a penniless youth, with his clothes in a small deal box, and an invention for improving upon the existing method of smelting ore in his head. It had been hard work for him to get any one to hear of his new process, harder still to get it adopted, hardest of all to get it recognised as his, and to get rewarded for it. But there was a vein of doggedness in the Blake family that made them conquerors in every struggle, and Geoffrey Blake pegged along the hard road of industrious poverty till he came to the Temple of Fortune. Once there the goddess treated him kindly. He died a millionaire, leaving two sons, the elder of whom inherited the bulk of his father's property, and carried on the ironworks, while the younger got forty thousand pounds in the funds, an estate called Tangley Manor, which was worth thirty thousand more, and turned country squire.

This was Walter Blake, Morton's father. He married a rural dean's daughter, who died six years after their marriage, leaving him with three children. He led a steady, reputable life, and was popular in his district. He hunted and shot a great deal, and farmed a little, and visited everybody worth visiting in the county; and in the prime and heyday of life, when his son Morton was just ten years old, he was foully murdered one October evening in the lane leading to Austhorpe, as he rode home from the hunt.

This direful event happened on the very day of Dulcie's birth: so Morton, as well as his sweetheart, had reason to regard the 20th of October as a melancholy anniversary.

This did not prevent the lovers being quietly happy together, as they sat by the fire, while the north wind rattled the casements and wrung groans as of remonstrance from the rocking elm branches.

'What a wintry night,' exclaimed Dulcie. 'I must put my warm cloaks in hand directly. If this weather is going to last the children will want them ever so long before Christmas.'

All the village children were under Dulcie's protection. She made them cloaks and hoods for winter; she gave them smart hats and tippets for summer. She taught in the Sunday school, and gave grand entertainments of tea and buns on the lawn, where the cedars had been growing ever since John Evelyn's time. Children, and mothers, and old women, were all more or less in Dulcie's care. There was never sickness in the village without her knowing of it and ministering to the sufferer; seldom a coffin for which her fair hands did not weave a wreath of hot-house flowers.

'Dulcie, Dulcie, how would this world get on without you?' said Morton, smiling at her earnestness.

'I should be no more missed than a rain-drop that falls into the sea,' answered Dulcie, 'except by my father; and I suppose you would feel a want of something for the first day or two.'

'That day or two would be all my life, Dulcie.'

She had edged her stool away from her father's feet, to Morton's, so they two were in a manner alone together, talking in subdued voices, while Sir Everard sat looking dreamily at the fire, absorbed in



thought. There never was a happier picture of domestic life. The girl's fair head nestling closely against her lover's arm, as it lay on the velvet cushion of his chair; Morton's earnest face looking down at her—a face full of power, with marked features, an open brow, curly brown hair, and thoughtful gray eyes. The father, in his low, deep chair on the other side of the hearth, a man still in the prime and vigour of life, with a profile as delicately chiselled as a cameo, clear, olive complexion, eyes of a darkly luminous gray, hair and beard like Hamlet's father's, 'a sable silvered,' but eyebrows and lashes still black as night. The face was at once handsome and remarkable. The form of forehead and skull promised a nature rich in fine qualities, benevolent, large-minded, intellectual. Dulcie might well be proud of such a father. The white hand with tapering fingers resting on the tawny velvet elbow of the chair would have been beautiful, even in a woman; yet it was a strong and muscular hand withal, and had pulled stroke on the Isis thirty years ago, and had been as true on the trigger of a rifle as the rugged paw of a Texan freebooter.

These quiet evenings were ordinarily periods of perfect repose and happiness for Sir Everard Courtenay, but on this one day of the year he was always thoughtful, and sometimes moody and depressed. If he could by any means have been beguiled into forgetting the date until the day was over and done with, he might perchance have been spared the pain of sad memories ; but modern civilization does not permit such oblivion. There, on his newspapers, on his letters, the date stared him in the face, and compelled him to remember.

Dulcie was not unmindful of her father, even when she seemed most engrossed by her lover's conversation. She stole a little look at him now and then, and presently rose from her low seat and went softly to the piano. She knew that pathetic music had a soothing influence upon Sir Everard, even when his own thoughts were saddest.

She played one of Chopin's dreamiest nocturnes—a melody which seemed the plaintive whisper of a tender regret—a mournful yet caressing strain, as of one who loved the very sorrow that consumed him. Music with Dulcie was a gift rather than an

accomplishment—there was soul in her fingers from the time she first touched the piano. Expression with her was thought and feeling, not a mechanical adjustment of finger tips, and mathematical gradation from loud to soft. She had been carefully taught and trained to interpret her favourite composers, but in whatever she played—Beethoven, Mozart, Mendlessohn, Chopin—there was always something of Dulcie's very self, an individual soul interwoven with every phrase.

She played on, passing from one nocturne to another, and then to the swelling chords of one of Beethoven's sonatas, while the shadows deepened in the room, and the logs dropped into ashes on the hearth.

Presently the door was softly opened, and the butler came in.

'There is a man in the office, Sir Everard, who wishes to see you on particular business. He has got a statement to make, he says.'

Sir Everard started up at the summons, thoroughly awakened out of his reverie. If there was one thing upon which he was more severe with himself than another it was in the strict performance

of his magisterial duties. He was a man of culture, loving books and art, and all the fairest things in life, a man to whom petty sessions and rural politics must needs be an abomination; yet he loved order so well that he had willingly undertaken the office of magistrate, and once having put his hand to the plough, had never wavered. He was unerringly just, but he did not lean to the side of mercy, and the villagers thought him a Draco.

‘What kind of a man?’

‘Looks like a tramp, Sir Everard!’

‘What can he want? Parish relief, I suppose. He should go to the overseer.’

‘So I told him, Sir Everard, thinking it might be that, but it isn’t. He says he wants to give himself up.’

‘Give himself up?’

‘Yes, Sir Everard, for a murder committed twenty years ago.’

Morton Blake started up, pale in the firelight. A man whose father had been murdered twenty years ago, on that very day, was not likely to hear such a statement calmly.

‘Twenty years ago?’ he cried. ‘Why this man must be my father’s murderer. Let me see him—let me——’

‘My dear Morton, don’t agitate yourself,’ remonstrated Sir Everard quietly. ‘Believe me, there is no reason. I know so well what this kind of thing means. Some idle, drunken, poaching, rick-burning vagabond, who has run the gamut of rural crime and drunk away the better part of his brains, takes it into his head to make his name famous by handing himself over to justice for the one solitary crime of which he is not guilty. A night in the lock-up at Highclere will bring him to his senses, and to-morrow morning he will be whining his recantation.’

‘But the date,’ exclaimed Morton, strongly agitated, ‘twenty years ago, this very day——’

‘A mere coincidence,’ returned Sir Everard lightly. ‘I daresay this vagabond never heard of your poor father, living or dead. I’ll soon get rid of the ruffian. Is the lamp lighted in the office, Scroope?’

‘Yes, Sir Everard, and there’s a good fire.’

‘You’ll come back to us directly you’ve done with the man, won’t you, papa?’ pleaded Dulcie, accompanying her father to the door.

‘Yes, dear, if you wish it.’

‘I do very much wish it. If you dispose of your visitor quickly, we can have just a quarter of an hour’s chat before the warning bell rings. You won’t be too hard upon this poor ignorant creature, will you, dear father?’ urged Dulcie, who had always her gentle prayer for infinite mercy to rogues and vagabonds. Sinners would have had an easy time of it if Miss Courtenay had sat in the magistrate’s chair.

Her father kissed her, and murmured a loving word or two, but promised nothing; and then Dulcie, with a regretful sigh that there should be so much sin and sorrow in the world, went back to the hearth where Morton stood looking down at the logs with fixed and gloomy brow.

She laid her hand lightly on his shoulder, but he did not feel or did not heed the touch.

‘Dear Morton,’ she said, ‘I am sorry this should have moved you so deeply.’

‘I am always moved when I think of my father’s

death. Do you suppose it was out of my mind on this day, at this hour, the very hour in which he was riding quietly homeward from the hunt—riding homeward, but never to reach home alive? Do you think that I can forget, Dulcie—that I can ever forget how he died, and that his murderer has never been discovered? If I thought the man in your father's office at this moment had hand or part in that deed, I don't think the restraints of civilization would be strong enough to prevent me rushing to that room and flying at his throat like a bulldog?'

There was something of the bulldog in his look as he spoke, the gloomy, yet resolute eye, the powerful jaw, the appearance of reserved power, every muscle braced for a spring.

'Ever since I can remember I have had one wish always uppermost in my mind, the desire to find myself face to face with the man who killed my father. Great heaven, think that he may now, on this twentieth anniversary of the murder, be standing within fifty yards of me! Dulcie, why should I not go to your father's office? Why should I not hear what the scoundrel has to say?'

‘For a hundred reasons. First, because you are in a most unchristian state of mind.’

‘Unchristian!’ muttered Blake. ‘Is it unchristian to hate the man who murdered my father?’

‘And would be likely to do some act which you might repent all the rest of your life. You heard what my father said, Morton? Be sure he knows what he is talking about. He has had thirteen years’ experience of these people. The man will not be able to deceive him. He will have justice, rigid justice; I know that too well, for I have so often had to plead for mercy in vain.’

‘And I am to wait here for an indefinite time?’ said Morton, turning from her with an impatient gesture, and walking up and down the room. ‘What, while a conversation which may be life or death for me is being carried on in my absence!’

Never before had he spoken so roughly to Dulcie. The change startled her, as when the glow and glory of a summer day turns all at once to cloud and storm. Some girls in Dulcie’s position would have resented the rudeness of the lover; she thought only of the son’s devotion to a dead father. She stole



to his side, and put her arm through his, and laid her head upon his shoulder.

‘You will not have long to wait, dear Morton. My father manages these people so well. Only be patient for a little while.’

## CHAPTER IV.

### A WILFUL MAN MUST HAVE HIS WAY.

THE magistrate's office was a panelled room which had been a private chapel in the days when country gentlemen of some standing kept their chaplains. It was a large and lofty apartment, but had a look of gloom and a chilly atmosphere upon this October evening, despite the coal fire which burned in the large grate at one end of the room. The grate was recessed in a cavernous chimney, and the greater part of the heat went up to the autumn skies.

Sir Everard's writing table stood in front of the hearth, furnished with a pair of shaded moderator lamps, which threw all their light on the table, and left the magistrate's face in shadow. Sir Everard loved a subdued light, and hated the glare of gas, or unshaded lamps of any kind. He had the eye of a hawk, and could see as well in this half light as most people can in the broad day.

Humphrey Vargas stood a little way from the writing table, a gaunt, clumsy figure, his arms hanging at his sides, his broad hands clenching and unclenching themselves with a nervous movement, now and then. His dog crouched at his side. The footman had tried to prevent the entrance of that mongrel to the magistrate's room, but Vargas had insisted.

'Where I goes my dog goes,' he said. 'You can't part us till you hang one on us.'

So there the dog was, quiet but watchful, evidently holding himself on the defensive, like a dog who knew he belonged to the criminal classes.

'Well, sir,' began the magistrate, seated in his roomy arm-chair—not a luxurious or effeminate chair, by any means, but the severest pollard oak and dark green morocco. 'Well, sir, what have you to say to me?'

'I want to give myself in charge.'

'Indeed! You are mighty conscientious all of a sudden. And pray which of your many crimes do you desire to expiate?'

He looked at the man keenly, though he spoke lightly, supposing he had to deal with some drunken

vagabond who was only half in earnest. To his surprise, however, this man did not look drunk. His gaunt frame and deeply sunken cheeks suggested starvation rather than riotous living. His eyes had a steady look, he stood firm upon his feet, and spoke like a man who had come there with a settled purpose.

‘I wants to give myself up for a murder I did twenty year ago—twenty year ago this blessed day—the murder of Muster Blake.’

Sir Everard looked at him long and steadily, looked at him as if he would pluck out the heart of his mystery, penetrate to the very bottom of his soul.

‘Oh,’ he said at last, with startling coolness. ‘You are the man, are you? I thought the murderer would turn up sooner or later, but I did not suppose he would be self-accused. Come, sir, tell me your story, as plainly and as briefly as you can, and when I have written it down I shall read it over to you in the presence of a witness, and you must sign your name to it. Do you understand?’

‘Yes,’ answered Vargas unmoved.

‘Well, begin,’ said the magistrate, dipping a pen in the ink, and looking up at the self-accused with quiet intentness.

‘Well, Sir Everard, things had gone bad with me that year—everythink. My wife had died, and when she was gone I went wrong altogether. It was the drink, I suppose. Perhaps I’d been a little wild in my ways while she was alive, but it warn’t anythink to talk about, and she kep’ a home over my head, though we’d had our troubles too. But when she was in the churchyard yonder, where she’s lying now,’ with a jerk of his head in the direction of the village, ‘I took to the pubs. They was the only places where I found warmth and company, and I wasted my wages on drink till the children was barefoot, and then, finding myself out of work one morning, and the little ones nigh upon starving, I give it up altogether and runned away.’

‘Leaving your children to the workhouse?’

‘I couldn’t have left ’em to a better home. The gals was brought up decently and sent to service, and the boys was taught trades. It’s a deal more

than I could ha' done for 'em. Well, Sir Everard, I turned my back upon my native place, and just turned waif and stray, doing an odd job of plastering here—for I'm a plasterer by trade—and a spell of haymakin' there, and a week or two at hop pickin' when the season came round, till somehow or other I worked my way back here, drifted like, strayed as a dog strays, for I didn't want to come. I'd no home to come to, no friend to give me a shelter, and I couldn't afford to show at the workus where my innercent orphans was ever so much better off without a father.'

Sir Everard had made the briefest note of this preliminary statement. The important disclosure was to come.

'Well, sir, one October day I finds myself standing under a sign-post in a wild bit of country, half wood, half heath, where three roads met. I'm blest if I knew until that moment, when I looked up and spied the name on the sign-post, how near I'd come to the old place. I knew I was in the county, and the hills and woods had the look of home somehow, but I didn't think I was half as near as I

was. I seemed to come all over of a shiver when I found I was only six mile from the Union where those blessed kids was being brought up in the fear o' the Lord. I'd had no breakfast. I had ekzac-kerly three half-pence in my pocket, and a screw o' tobacco, and I knew I was a good two mile from any place where I could buy a penn'orth o' beer. It was a mild, still day, and the roads and lanes was mucky and soft, just the day for the scent to lie well. I'd seen the red coats in the distance on the slope of the hill, and I didn't want to meet none o' them, for the huntsman would ha' known me, seein' as I had run with the hounds and opened gates in old times when I was a lad.

'So I just crep into the wood hard by, and laid down in the holler of a old oak, where I was as warm as a toast among the moss and withered leaves, and where I laid and smoked my pipe for a couple of hours at a stretch to quiet my empty inside. I didn't come out till it was drawing towards dusk. I'd heard the hounds giving tongue, and the huntsman's cry more than once while I laid there, as they wound and beat about wood

and heath, but I thought I could get quietly back to the coach road without meeting any one as would reckonise me in the dusk. I took a short cut across the fields, meanin' to get back to the high road a mile or so from Austhorpe on the way to Highclere, and keep clear of the village altogether. I'd been on the tramp above a week since I left Kent, and I'd slept under 'edges and 'ay stacks, and there was pains in every blessed bone o' my body that gnawed like rats. I had my bit of a bundle swung on a cudgel over my shoulder, and I trudged on somehow, while the crows went wheeling across the sky, which was turning yaller, though there hadn't been not one blessed glimmer of sunshine all day. Well, you see, sir, I trudged along the muddy road, and I was just in that kind o' temper when the devil gets a grip upon a man and can make him do ekzackerly as he likes. I was hungry and thirsty and footsore; but what I felt more than hunger and thirst was a raging hate against them as wasn't, and never had been, nor never was likely to be famished and footsore and without a penny. Why should they have



all the good things, and I all the bad things o' this life? I suppose I ain't the first man as has arst hisself that question, and I don't think I shall be the last; but I walks on, with such thoughts in my head, till I comes to the lane that leads from Austhorpe to Highclere, hard by Blatchmardean wood, and presently I hears the steady tramp of a horse's hoofs walking along the soft road; and I stands aside to let the rider go by, thinkin' he might be good for a sixpence. It's a gentleman in a red coat, and I begins my sorrerful tale, how I'd a sick wife and seven small children, and not a penny to buy bread—but before I gets half-way through I looks up into his face and rekernizes him for my old enemy, Muster Blake, him as turned me off his estate and out of house and home, for a bit of a mistake made by a lurcher dog as I used to keep, with regard to some pheasants as he set particklar store by. I knows him and he knows me. "Get out o' my road, you vagabond," he cries, "I wouldn't give you sixpence to save you and all your brood from starving." He looked mortal handsome in his red coat and striped velvet

weskit, and there was his thick gold watch chain and seals, swinging as he moved, and shinin' in the yaller light o' the low sky in front of him. He looked a regular swell, he did. That 'ere watch and chain of his must be worth fifty pounds anywheres, I thought, and I dessay his purse is full o' sovereigns; for I knowed him to be one o' your fine, open-handed gentry, allus ready to give money to them as didn't want it. And Old Nick took me by the shoulders, and gave me a shove, as you may say, and whispered, "Pull the proud beggar off his horse; pull him, into the mud, and brain him." I looked round. There wasn't a mortal in sight. It was gettin' dark. I should be miles away before anybody knew anything. He was a strong man, on a strong horse. Could I do it? While I was hesitatin', the devil gives me another shove, and whispers, "I'll help you," and then I threw down my bundle, clutched holt of the bridle, and hit the hoss a crack o' the skull that brought him on his knees in the road, and before Muster Blake could recover from the shock of the hoss falling under him, he and I had closed with each other in a deadly struggle. He was bigger than

me, stronger than me, a better man every way ; but Old Nick kep' his word, and stood by me like a good un. Muster Blake had only his huntin' crop with a bamboo cane and a leather thong. He cut me a wonner across the face with the thong, but I came down on his bare head—for his hat was knocked off at the first go—with the knobby end of my cudgel. I heard his skull go crack, like a bit o' glass, and then he fell backwards into the muddy road, and I just dragged him quietly into the ditch and cleaned out his pockets. There was a leather purse full of gold and silver, as I hoped, and his watch and chain, and a diamond ring on his little finger ! and I felt I had done a good day's work. For, yer see, I didn't know for sure as I'd killed him. Even if that was his skull as I heard go crack, the doctors might lay a bit o' metal atop 'on it, and make a sound man of him again. I'd heard tell o' such things. So I tied the watch and chain and ring and money up in my fogle, and stuffed it all into my breeches pocket, and caught up my bundle on the end o' my cudgel, and made tracks for the Highclere road.'

‘When and where did you dispose of the stolen property?’ inquired Sir Everard, after a pause.

‘At Great Barford, six weeks after Muster Blake’s death.’

‘And I suppose this is all you have to tell me?’

‘Yes, sir, this yere’s about all.’

Throughout this confession Sir Everard Courtenay had sat in a thoughtful attitude, with his left elbow on the table, and his forehead resting on his left hand, while with his right he jotted down an occasional note upon the paper before him. It was not possible for Vargas to see the impression made on the listener’s mind by his narrative.

‘Come, now, my man,’ said the magistrate, looking up at him suddenly, with a frank friendliness, ‘you’ve told your story very well, and to some ears it might sound like the truth, but it doesn’t to mine. I know what a curious machine the human mind is, and what strange twists it sometimes takes. Don’t you think you’d better forget you’ve told me anything,

except that you're hard up and want a night's lodging ?'

'No,' answered Vargas, in a surly tone, 'I'm not going from my word. What you've took down there I'll stand by.'

'You will? Have you considered that it's a hanging matter? That you are offering yourself as a candidate for the gallows ?'

'I don't feel sure as they'd hang a man—after twenty years.'

'You won't find the twenty years make any difference.'

'Besides, it warn't altogether murder, yer see. When I hit him that crack over the skull I didn't know as it 'ud be his death.'

'I fear you will hardly find a Daleshire jury inclined to draw such nice distinctions. Mr. Blake was a popular man, and feeling ran high about his murder. I would not give much for your life after that statement of yours has been read before twelve Daleshiremen.'

'I'll risk it,' said Vargas doggedly. 'I don't believe they'll hang me. If they do it'll be ending a

life that ain't worth living. Come, get your witness, Sir Everard, I wants to sign that there depysition.'

'You are an obstinate fool,' exclaimed the baronet angrily. 'And if I refuse to receive your statement I suppose you will go and make the same confession to some one else.'

'I shall go to Highclere as fast as my poor old legs will carry me—which is slow enough, lord knows—and give myself up to the magistrate there.'

'A wilful man must have his way,' said Sir Everard, ringing a bell which sounded loud and shrill in the outer office. 'Your way is the gallows. Remember that I have warned you, and don't ask me to help you after to-night, for it will be out of my power to do so. Don't come and whine to me when you've changed your mind.'

'I shan't change my mind,' answered Vargas. 'I ain't afraid o' that. But as you seem to wish to deal kind by a poor devil, I'll arst you a favour. I've got a bit of a dog here. He ain't much to look at, but he'll keep your poultry yard clear o' rats. Give him a armful o' straw to lie on and a

bit o' vitals to eat, and you'll be doin' it ten times over to me.'

'He shall be taken care of,' answered Sir Everard.

A man-servant appeared in answer to the bell.

'Send for Jackson immediately, and take that dog to the stables. Tell Gilbert he is to be taken care of.'

'God bless you, Sir Everard,' said Vargas, with moistening eyes.

He took the cur up by the scruff of his neck, pressed his cold muzzle against his own dry lips, and handed him to the servant.

'The constable will be here in ten minutes, if he happen to be at home when my messenger calls at his cottage,' said Sir Everard, addressing himself to Vargas when the servant left the room. 'You have just ten minutes for reflection and repentance. If you don't change your mind in that time you'll be booked. I'll leave you to reflect.'

He went away, leaving the self-accused at perfect

liberty to make a bolt of it by the back door if he pleased. Never had Sir Everard treated a criminal so leniently. This was due to Dulcie's influence, no doubt.



## CHAPTER V.

### DULCIE ASKS QUESTIONS.

DESPITE his promise, Sir Everard did not go back to the drawing-room immediately on leaving his office. He went straight to his study, a cosy room lined with books from floor to ceiling, where he generally spent his mornings. There was a shaded lamp burning on the small round table near the fire, and the red light of the logs was reflected cheerfully on the gay colours of the tiled hearth. Dark-green velvet curtains were drawn before the one wide window; everything suggested snugness and seclusion.

Sir Everard sank, with a weary air, into his chair by the hearth, and lay back with closed eyes, resting from his labours.

‘What an obstinate fool the fellow is,’ he said to himself; ‘and how strange that this monomania of self-accusation should crop up as often as it does. Yet there’s a part of his story that sounds true. The watch and chain were pledged at Great Barford.’

That fact came out at the time, and the police tried to follow up the clue, ineffectually.'

The warning bell rang while he sat thinking by the fire, and Sir Everard went upstairs to change his black velvet lounging jacket for evening clothes, leaving Vargas to his fate. Domestic life at Fairview could not be hindered in its quiet course because a self-accused criminal was anxious to deliver himself over to the law. Sir Everard's valet was in attendance in his dressing-room, a man of about five-and-thirty, tall, slim, with insignificant features, and a faded complexion, redeemed by clever-looking gray eyes ; a very superior person altogether, and looked up to by the household. His master had picked him up at the gates of the *Hôtel des Invalides* in Paris, where, in an impecunious interval, he was trying to earn a franc or two by acting as guide to inquiring-minded tourists. He was a man who had seen life under curious aspects. Starting as the scapegrace son of a country parson, he had cut short his university career by a boyish folly, and had then and there turned his back upon what society calls respectability, and what he called Philistinism. He

had dug a deepish hole in the paternal purse during his college days, but had made a manly stand against any further dependence upon his father. 'I am not fit for anything but a wandering life, and I'd better be a waif and a stray abroad than a burden at home,' he said. After arriving at this decision, he had enjoyed a varied career as courier, waiter, billiard-marker, in France and Switzerland, had acquired all sorts of odd out-of-the-way talents, and had finally found himself in Paris, without friends or credentials, face to face with starvation, when Sir Everard Courtenay heard his story, believed it, and took him into his service. Never had master a better servant, or one who seemed more conscientious in the performance of his duties.

'There is rather a queer character in my office, Stanton,' said Sir Everard. 'You'd better tell Scroope to keep his eye upon the plate-room, and tell them to let me know when the constable comes. I shan't want you.'

Everything necessary to the baronet's toilet had been put ready. The valet retired quietly, and Sir Everard began to dress.

He was somewhat slower than his wont in the process of dressing—dawdled and lingered a little, took things up and laid them down again, with a dreamy, irresolute air. Was not this a day full of sad memories? and those memories had been made more vivid by the tramp's confession.

He could hardly think about Walter Blake's murder without recalling his wife's untimely death, which had happened on the same day. He was on his knees beside the deathbed when the news was brought to Fairview.

At last all was done, quickly enough, though he had lingered, and Sir Everard went down to the drawing-room, passing Scroope in the hall as he went.

'Jackson went to Highclere this afternoon, Sir Everard,' said the butler. 'Not expected home before nine o'clock. Gilbert left word that he was to come here directly.'

'Very good; you can keep an eye on that man in my office, he may be a thief.'

'I've turned the key in the door, Sir Everard.'

That is unnecessary. Go and unlock it at once,

and give the fellow a meal of bread and meat: he looks half-starved.'

Morton Blake was sitting alone before the fire, when Sir Everard went into the drawing-room.

'Well, sir,' he cried, getting up quickly and going to meet his host, 'you have kept me a long time in suspense. Was there any truth in my suspicion? Is this man my father's murderer?'

'Pray restrain yourself, Morton. The man is in my opinion either mad, or a rogue who for some occult reason accuses himself of a crime he has not committed.'

'Then he has confessed — he is the man,' cried Morton hoarsely. 'Let me see him—let me hear—'

'My dear Morton, this is a business in which you have no right to interfere.'

'No right—no right! I, the victim's son?'

'Absolutely none. You must wait till the law of the land shall avenge your father's death. If this man has spoken the truth—which I strongly doubt—and if he adhere to his statement by-and-by, the business will be easy enough, and you may have the satisfaction of seeing him hanged in Highclere jail, and may possibly be a happy man ever afterwards.'

‘I shall be a more contented man, anyhow, when I know that my father’s murderer has been punished answered Morton resolutely. ‘Well, what is to be done next? The man is in your office, handcuffed, in custody, I suppose?’

‘Not yet. I am waiting till Jackson comes home from Highclere. Don’t look so savage, Morton. The man is safe enough. He wishes to give himself into custody.’

‘He may change his mind, and give you the slip.’

‘No fear of that. I have told Scroope to look after him, and Scroope has locked him in.’

‘Sensible of Scroope. What kind of creature is he—this devil?’

‘If I described him at all I should call him a poor devil.’

‘Can’t I see him—without his knowing it—so that I might identify him if he should escape? want to have the man’s image in my mind. The scoundrel who killed my father in his prime of life and vigour, with all the world smiling on him, and all the future full of hope. Can’t I see him, Sir Everard?’

‘If you like to go round the house and look in at

the office window you may see him plain enough, I dare say. The shutters were not shut when I was there. But there's the bell, and here's Dulcie. You'd better come to dinner.'

'No, no,' answered Morton, painfully agitated. 'I can't dine to-night. You must excuse me, Sir Everard. Dulcie!'—she was standing close at his side, pale, and watchful of his face,—'forgive me, dear. I must go. I will come back later in the evening, Sir Everard, and hear what has happened. You won't play me false in this, will you? I believe the man has told the truth. I believe that retribution is coming after twenty years. Don't take the matter lightly. Remember, my father was your friend.'

'Am I likely to forget that? His face is in my mind to-night. But in a matter of this kind I must not let passion be my guide. However, I have happily very little to do here. I shall hand this fellow over to Jackson, the constable, and then my work is done. But you must be reasonable, Morton; affection must not make you unjust. Deeply as you must feel your father's death it could be no satisfaction to you to hang an innocent man.'

‘Why do you take it for granted that this man is innocent?’ Morton demanded impatiently.

‘Simply because he calls himself guilty. Real guilt rarely surrenders liberty and life uncompelled. I have not the least doubt that, after having caused you all this painful agitation, and me a good deal of trouble, the fellow will make his recantation to-morrow before the Highclere magistrates.’

‘Good-night,’ said Morton shortly. ‘Good-night, Dulcie.’

He scarcely touched the hand she gave him as he passed hurriedly from the room.

‘What a miserable birthday,’ thought poor Dulcie, as she and her father went across the hall to the dining-room. ‘My birthdays have always been sad, but this is the worst of all.’

The father and daughter sat opposite each other at the snug round table, with Morton’s empty place between them. There had been no special invitation for to-day’s dinner, but the place was always laid for him when he was in the house. Dulcie gave one sad little look at the vacant chair, and then made believe to go on with her dinner, eating hardly anything.



The solemn Scroope moved to and fro, with his underling following up and supporting him, as it were; and the two servants ministering assiduously to the wants of two people, utterly without appetite or inclination to eat, were an admirable example of domestic comedy in the 'Much Ado about Nothing' line. From the clear soup to the wild duck Scroope abated no iota of ceremony.

Dulcie was longing to be alone with her father, but Scroope lingered affectionately by her plate, with offers of lemon and cayenne.

He insisted on her taking dessert, and when she had refused a bunch of purple grapes which might have tempted an anchorite, followed her up, perseveringly, with preserved ginger. He was very particular about the temperature of Sir Everard's claret, and made a good deal of play with the jug before he could bring his mind to the necessity of leaving father and daughter alone.

During dinner they had talked very little, and only of indifferent subjects. Dulcie's eyelids were heavy with unshed tears. Sir Everard was grave and absent-minded. But at last, to the girl's infinite

relief, Scroope and his subordinate withdrew, the latter respectfully drawing the door after him with his foot, and father and daughter were alone.

Sir Everard wheeled his chair round, and sat facing the fire; Dulcie crept round to the hearth, and took her favourite place on the fender stool at his feet, with her bright head resting on the arm of his chair.

‘Dearest father, I want you to tell me a great many things,’ she said coaxingly, yet seriously withal, and her face was full of earnestness, as she looked up at him. ‘There are some questions I can’t ask Morton. Will it make you very sad if I talk about—the past?’

‘I am always sad when I think of the past, Dulcie. Whether you talk of it or no can make very little difference.’

‘I want you to tell me about Morton’s father. Was he a good man?’

‘He was a popular man, good looking, clever, open-handed. That kind of man is generally liked.’

‘And you liked him?’

‘My dear, what a question. He was one of my oldest friends. We were at Rugby and at Cambridge together.’

‘Yes, I know. But those friendships do not always last. You might have altered towards each other afterwards. I have sometimes fancied that there was a constraint in your manner when you talked to Morton about his father, or, rather, when Morton has mentioned his father, for I have seldom heard you speak of him of your own accord.’

‘The terrible circumstances of his death make the subject a painful one.’

‘Yes, I ought to have understood that. But I have noticed that people get accustomed to any idea, however dreadful, and end by talking of it familiarly, as if it were an everyday event.’

‘I could never grow accustomed to the idea of Walter Blake’s death.’

‘That is because you are more sensitive than the common herd of people,’ answered his daughter lovingly. ‘Tell me, dear father, do you think the man in your office is really the murderer?’

‘My love, how can I tell? There are some points in his story which to my mind bear the stamp of improbability. Yet, if it be found that he is the man who disposed of the murdered man’s property, it

will go hard with him to prove himself innocent, supposing that he should wish to get his neck out of the noose into which he has thrust it.'

'Should you be glad if he were found guilty, if it were proved to the satisfaction of everybody that he is the murderer?' asked Dulcie, intensely earnest.

'Not glad, dear. Yet it is a good thing that the perpetrator of a great crime should be discovered, even after an interval of many years; that he should be so lashed and goaded by his own conscience as to give himself up to justice. Yes, it must be good. It may serve as a warning to many. Think how sharp the sting of conscience must be when it can goad a man to the surrender of liberty and life.'

'Poor creature,' sighed Dulcie, full of pity even for the vilest of mankind. Young and inexperienced as she was, her mind and heart were large enough to comprehend and compassionate all sin and sorrow. 'He must have been horribly tempted before he could commit such a crime. Was it starvation that drove him to it, do you think?'

'His plea is something of that kind. Blake had treated him badly, it seems.'

‘Revenge. That is a fearful passion,’ said Dulcie.

‘One you will never know, I hope, little one,’ answered her father tenderly. ‘And now, dear, we will talk no more about painful things. My poor Dulcie, what a sorrowful birthday!’

‘Not altogether sorrowful, dear father. To be with you is enough happiness for me.’

‘Is it, Dulcie?’ asked her father, bending down to look searchingly into the sweet, fair face, with frank blue eyes lifted lovingly to meet his own. ‘Are you sure of that? Yet if I were to ask you to give up Morton—if you and he were doomed to be parted—your heart would break. Have you not confessed as much as that?’

‘Does it seem inconsistent?’ she asked. ‘Is it impossible to love two people intensely? You have given me to Morton; and I know you would never take your gift back. I am not afraid of injustice from you. But if such a thing were possible—if you stood on one side and Morton on the other—and I were called upon to choose between my father and my lover——’

‘What would you do?’

‘I would cleave to you, father. I don’t know which is the greater love, but I know which is the more sacred. You are more to me than all the world.’

‘My darling!’ cried Sir Everard, bending to kiss the earnest lips.

## CHAPTER VI.

‘THIS MAN KILLED MY FATHER.’

WHILE the father and daughter sat together by the cheerful home fireside, exchanging confidences full of love and trustfulness, Morton Blake was pacing the shrubbery path alone, his soul at war with all the world. He went round to the back of the house where the lighted windows of the justice-room shone out upon the misty autumn night. There were no shutters or blinds to hide the scene within. Morton walked close up to the window, and looked in as at a stage play.

There at a plain oaken table in the centre of the large, scantily furnished room, at some distance from Sir Everard's writing-table and arm-chair, sat the self-accused murderer, eating his supper of bread and meat.

A joint and a big home-baked loaf had been set before him, and he had been left alone with the food,

no one to measure or stint his meal. He was eating more like a savage beast than a human being; now tearing at a slice of meat, anon gnawing at a huge hunch of bread; his eyes shifting uneasily towards the door every other instant, as if he thought the whole thing were too good to be true, and expected momentarily to be interrupted in his feast.

'Wolf!' muttered Morton, scowling at him through the glass. 'Could any man in his senses doubt this creature's capacity for murder? A mere ravenous beast, a body wanting to be fed, muscles and sinews, and flesh and bone craving nutriment, a being without mind, or heart, or conscience; a creature that would as soon kill as breathe. Strange that remorse can have power over a soul so blunted and brutalized, a nature so gross and low.'

He stood as if rooted to the spot, watching every look, every movement of the man inside.

'This man killed my father,' he said to himself. 'This debased wretch, wanting only to eat and live, cut short that brave happy life in its flower, laid that handsome head in the dust, and made my boyhood desolate. For the sake of a handful of sovereigns



and a few trinkets that noble life was sacrificed. Devil,’ he muttered between his set teeth, ‘I am sorry that the law must have you. I would rather my own right hand avenged my father’s death.’

The man ate on with undiminished voracity; hacking the joint, mauling the big brown loaf, luxuriating in the plenitude of an unfamiliar luxury. Once, and once only, he paused in his banquet, and that was to look down at his knee, and then along the floor, and under the table wistfully, with a regretful sigh.

‘I wish Tim had been here,’ he said. ‘Wouldn’t he ha’ enjoyed hisself? But ee’s well off, I’ll warrant. That Sir Everard’s a soft un, though folks calls him hard.’

There came a stage in the meal when even the starved wayfarer’s hunger was appeased. The joint had shrunk to a bone, the noble loaf was reduced by half, and Humphrey Vargas leant back in his chair a contented man. True that he had surrendered his liberty, that fetters and jail were to be his portion, that a possible gallows loomed in the future. The thought of these things troubled him but little. He had filled himself with bread and meat. For the

first time in many months he had enjoyed an ample meal.

The cautious butler had given him nothing but water to drink, obeying Sir Everard's order in the letter rather than the spirit. His master had said bread and meat, and he had given the man bread and meat, no more and no less.

'I should ha' liked a sup o' gatter,' sighed the tramp, 'but I've blowed myself out pretty fair without it, and I ain't ungrateful. To-morrow, I suppose, it'll be skilly and soup; but that'll be a deal better than hips and haws, and bits o' mouldy pannam, stole out of a pigsty.'

Morton Blake walked away from the window, and strolled slowly round by a shrubberied walk to the broad terrace in front of the house.

The moon had risen, and the mists of evening were floating away from garden and chase, and the wide landscape beyond. Fairview stood on high ground, and from the terrace Morton could see woodland and valley, the twinkling lights of a low-lying village, and yonder, far away to the left, on the edge of the horizon, the dimly-defined outline of

the roofs and steeples of Highclere, the county town.

The wind had gone down with the rising of the moon. The air was cold, but Morton was hardly sensible of its chilliness as he walked slowly up and down the terrace, or paused now and then to stand with folded arms looking across the Italian garden, the velvet lawns, and choice timber, to the vaguer world beyond, looking with fixed eyes, which saw no feature of the familiar scene. ‘How cold, and indifferent they are,’ he said to himself. ‘It seems nothing to them that after all these years my father’s murderer stands revealed, and retribution is at hand. Even Dulcie would sooner yonder wretch should go scot free than that he should expiate his crime. Yes, I believe she would be weak enough to feel sorry for him.’

For the first time in his life he was inclined to be angry with his betrothed—for the first time since he had known and loved her he felt their hopes and interests were divided.

How sad she had looked when he left her just now. He seemed to himself hardly to have noticed that

tender, pleading glance at the time : yet now that one particular look flashed upon his memory, and was as vividly present to his eye as a face in a picture, and that one picture the gem of the gallery. He turned towards the porch, tempted to go back to Dulcie. The lighted windows of her favourite room shone out upon the moonlit garden, with the cheerful glow of lamps and fire. He was in no mood for lover's talk, or music, or poetry, or art ; but he wanted to see Dulcie again before the evening was over.

The hall door was neither locked nor barred against him. He had only to turn the handle and go in ; yet on the point of doing so he changed his mind, and went back to the shrubbery at the end of the house, and round again to the justice-room. When he looked through the window the prisoner was no longer alone. Sir Everard was standing by his writing table, with a paper in his hand, reading its contents aloud, while the local constable respectfully listened, and Vargas stood aloof, twisting his flabby hat in his bony old hands, and quietly awaiting the next turn in that wheel of fortune which had rarely revolved in such a way as to bring him any good.

Presently Vargas, at the magistrate's bidding, walked up to the table, and, with laborious effort, affixed his signature to the deposition that had just been read over to him. His sign manual was only a cross, but he took as much pains in producing it as if it had been the most perfect thing in autographs.

‘I’ve got a shay-cart at my place,’ said the constable, who was a bluff, rosy-cheeked rustic, ‘and I shall soon spin him over to Highclere. You haven’t got nothink in the way of firearms or other weapons about you, have you, mate?’ he inquired of Vargas, running his hand dexterously over the man’s gaunt figure, as he spoke, to assure himself that there were no such implements of slaughter concealed under his scanty rags.

‘No,’ growled Vargas, ‘I can’t see where a old scarecrow like me could hide a revolver or a blunderbuss. There ain’t much room in my rotten old togs.’

The constable clapped a pair of handcuffs upon him with a business-like air, as if there were no malice in the proceeding, and then with a bow to Sir Everard led his prisoner away.

'Thank God,' exclaimed Morton, 'my mind is easier now that's done.'

He ran quickly round to the front of the house, and then to the avenue along which the two men must come, and here in the shadow of the elm trunks he stood and waited for them.

They passed him presently, the prisoner walking at a slow and dogged pace beside the guardian of the village peace, his head sunk on his breast, his fettered wrists hanging in front of him, his weary old shoulders stooping under the burden of a long life of penury, disrepute, and evil-doing; a creature too low for hatred, looked at from a philosopher's point of view. Morton Blake saw in him not the natural product of an imperfect civilization, but only the murderer of a beloved father, and hated him with unmeasured wrath.

He followed the constable and his companion to the village, waited while a Methuselah among ponies was harnessed to the shay-cart, and saw the official drive briskly along the moonlit lane towards Highclere, with his prisoner sitting anyhow, a high-shouldered heap of degraded humanity, at his side.

'They will pass the ditch where my father was found twenty years ago this very night,' said Morton.

He set off across the field to his own house, pondering as he went along how he was to tell the story of to-night's business at home.

Tangley Manor was just a mile and a half from Austhorpe, in the opposite direction to Highclere. It was a pleasant walk through country lanes, crossing the London road about half way from Austhorpe. The estate was large, the land some of the most fertile in the county, for old Geoffrey Blake had never bought a bad thing. There was a good deal of wood, which the purchaser had got for a song, but which gave dignity and beauty to the substantial modern mansion which he had built on the site of a picturesque old half-timbered farmhouse.

The lighted windows of Tangley Manor House shone upon Morton with a comfortable look, as he walked slowly across the common which lay between the gates and the coach-road.

The house stood only a little way back from the common, a lawn and flower beds in front, shrubberies

on each side. Encircling the garden and shrubberies there was a wood, where no axe had been heard, save for improvement, for the last fifty years. Old Geoffrey Blake had loved Tangley, and his son Walter, born in the newly-erected manor-house, had inherited his father's affection for every tree and every acre.

'Poor Aunt Dora!' sighed Morton, as he drew nearer the house. 'She will feel it most. She loved him dearly, and mourned him more deeply than any of us, yes, even than I; for as time went by and I grew older I had all the distractions of Rugby and Cambridge, while she sat at home and mourned for him. How shall I tell her?—how re-open the old wound without giving her unspeakable pain? But she must know. The county papers will be full of this business, two days hence!'



## CHAPTER VII.

### MORTON'S WOMENKIND.

THE drawing-room at Tangley Manor was as handsome and as interesting as any room can be which has not been mellowed and sanctified by the passage of centuries. It was a spacious and lofty room, with a noble bay on one side, and three long French windows on the other. There was a fireplace at each end, the white marble mantel-pieces low and broad, giving ample space for the display of some exquisite specimens of modern Sèvres, chosen by Geoffrey Blake during one of his holiday visits to Paris, a city which had possessed peculiar interest for his active and inquiring mind. The furniture was in perfect taste, light in form and delicate in colour, simple as befitted a room that was designed rather for daily usage than for stately receptions. There were dwarf bookcases between the windows, and on each side of the fireplace; water-coloured drawings on the walls; ferns

and flowers wherever space could be found for them.

The room wore its most cheerful aspect to-night when Morton entered it, after his lonely walk by field, and lane, and common. Wood fires burned brightly in the two grates. Large moderator lamps, with coloured shades, gave a warm, yet subdued light. Four ladies were seated near the fireplace at the further end of the room, in various attitudes, and variously employed.

The middle-aged lady, sitting in a low, wide arm-chair with a lamp and a work-basket on the gipsy table before her, was Walter Blake's maiden sister, Dorothy, better known in that house as Aunt Dora, the head of the household, respected and beloved by every member of the family, from Morton to the newest comer in the shape of a chubby-cheeked scullery-maid or a fortnight-old kitten.

She was one of those women whose beauty in youth is open to question, but who are undeniably handsome in later life. As a girl Dorothy Blake's face had lacked colour and brightness; her manners had been wanting in animation. Girls with homelier features

and more vivid complexions had been admired where Dorothy's pale and interesting countenance passed unnoticed. But at forty-five Miss Blake's clearly-chiselled features and delicate complexion, her slim and graceful figure, made her remarkable among middle-aged women.

Her hair had grown gray before she was six-and-twenty. It had not bleached suddenly in a single night, but within one year of that night of horror on which Walter Blake's corpse was carried home to Tangley Manor his sister's dark brown hair had changed to gray. It was now of a silvery hue, which harmonized exquisitely with the pale fair skin and soft hazel eyes.

Aunt Dora's gowns always fitted to perfection, and were always in the fashion; yet she never wore a garment unbefitting her years. She was not the kind of woman to encase herself in a boating Jersey because the fashion book told her that Jerseys were universally worn. The young people of her acquaintance looked up to her as an authority on dress and manners, the arbiter of taste. She loved all beautiful things, pretty girls, delicate colours, flowers wild and

exotic, ferns hedgerow or hothouse, handsome furniture, rich dress, thorough-bred horses. She had tastes wide enough to embrace all the delights of life, yet was not self-indulgent. She would leave the cosy chair beside the Gothic fireplace in her luxurious morning room to walk three or four miles through muddy lanes in the vilest weather, if by so doing she could give comfort to the afflicted in mind or body. She was the friend and adviser of all the wives, mothers, and daughters in the parish.

On a corner of the fender stool in front of the fireplace sat Morton's eldest sister, Clementine, otherwise Tiny, a delicately-fashioned girl, who seemed never to have grown out of childhood, and who was a perpetual outrage to Horatia—her strong-minded younger sister—a tall, plump, well-filled-out young woman, who looked just as many years too old as Tiny looked too young for her age. The sisters were curiously different in character, tastes, and personal appearance; yet they contrived to be on excellent terms with each other, and only quarrelled in sport.

Horatia was playing at chess with a girl who seemed younger than either of Morton's sisters; a

girl with soft gray eyes, rippling brown hair, and features with no special claim to beauty, save that the rosy mobile lips were lovely in form and expression, and the teeth perfect in shape and colour. This last was a young lady about whom Daleshire society troubled itself very little. She was rarely included in those invitations to garden parties and afternoon dances which were sent to the daughters of the house. She was known to be a humble dependent upon Miss Blake ; a girl of obscure birth whom that lady had adopted fifteen years ago ; an altogether estimable young person in her proper sphere—that sphere being, of course, one of usefulness and not of ornament—a girl born to carry comforts to the sick and poor, and whom one would be surprised to meet in the lanes or on the common without a basket on her arm ; a girl who would be expected to like walking in wet weather, and always to wear thick boots and short petticoats ; to be expert in every branch of decorative art, from the fitting-up of a baby-basket to the arrangement of a dinner-table ; a girl who would be a marvel of handiness in all those small duties that make up the pre-

paration for a grand party, who would work like a slave till the last moment before the arrival of the guests, and who would not feel the faintest desire to mingle with the festive throng. This was the kind of thing which Daleshire society expected from Elizabeth Hardman, of whose birth and connexions it was only vaguely stated that she belonged to factory people at Blackford, and ought, in the common course of events, herself to be making steel pens or brass buttons. Society, as represented by Mrs. Aspinall, of the Towers, looked with a disapproving eye on Aunt Dora's adoption of the orphan.

'These things never turn out well for anybody concerned,' said Mrs. Aspinall, with her superior air, as if she had been by when the foundations of the earth were laid, and had seen the stars marshalled into their places. 'That girl will be a thorn in Dorothy Blake's side before we are many years older.'

Meanwhile Elizabeth Hardman was happy enough, though she was left out of everybody's lawn parties, and only knew what an afternoon dance was like from Tiny's vivid description. She was not a girl of wide ambitions. Her highest aspiration at present

was to please Aunt Dora, and she was as entirely happy trudging over the common with a well-filled basket on her arm, as she would have been at the finest assembly in Daleshire.

Aunt Dora and the three girls looked up as Morton entered, all surprised at his return.

‘How early you are,’ exclaimed Tiny, throwing herself back against the marble pillar of the chimney-piece, and, stretching out her pretty little feet for the easier contemplation of a pair of picturesque buckled shoes and black silk stockings. ‘Did the spooning process seem a little flat this evening? We seldom see you till past eleven when you have been dining at Fairview.’

‘I have not dined at Fairview.’

‘Then where have you been dining, child?’ asked Horatia, with her practical manner. ‘It must have been a very dull dinner or you would hardly have come away so early. If you don’t want to be ignominiously checkmated in three more moves, Lizzie, you had better put a little more intention into your playing,’ added the younger Miss Blake severely.

Lizzie Hardman detested chess and all other

games of skill or chance, but had to play anything and everything when the Miss Blakes wanted an adversary. She was a capital person to play against, as she invariably lost the game.

Just now her senses had fled from the board altogether, scared by that pale, set look in Morton's face, which indicated trouble of some kind. Aunt Dora was occupied with her knitting, and had only murmured a friendly welcome. Tiny was still gazing at her shoe-buckles, and thinking how nice it was to be born with a high instep. Horatia was absorbed in a profound scheme for checkmating her weak antagonist in three moves.

'I haven't dined at all,' said Morton, dropping into a chair near his aunt. 'I have had some business to look after.'

'Not dined,' cried Aunt Dora. 'Ring the bell, Tiny; your brother must have some dinner. There was a pheasant sent away untouched. If you were to have that after a little soup, Morton.'

'Dear auntie, don't worry yourself about pheasants and soups,' said her nephew, with a wearied air. 'I am rather tired, but I've no



appetite for dinner. I'll take a crust and a glass of wine presently.'

Tiny withdrew her gaze from her shoes to contemplate humanity in the uninteresting form of a brother. They were very pretty eyes—blue and bright, and smiling like sunshiny weather.

'You have quarrelled with Dulcie,' she exclaimed. 'Nothing less than that would explain your dilapidated condition.'

'Dulcie and I are not given to quarrelling,' answered her brother curtly.

'What, do you never fight desperately, in order to make friends again?' asked Tiny. 'I thought that was one of the symptoms of spooning.'

'Clementine, your slang and flippancy are becoming more insufferable every hour,' remarked Horatia, with her fingers hovering above a bishop.

'Will you give me five minutes in your own room, Aunt Dora?' asked Morton in a low voice.

Miss Blake laid down her knitting instantly, and rose to comply with his request.

'Morton, how white you are looking!' she exclaimed. 'Something has happened.'

'Yes, something has happened.'

'Nothing that concerns Dulcie?'

Aunt Dora was very fond of Morton's sweetheart.

'No, dearest auntie, Dulcie is right enough.'

Horatia and Clementine now began to perceive that something was amiss. Tiny rose from her low seat. Horatia left the game unfinished.

'Morton, you are unnecessarily mysterious and alarming,' she said disapprovingly. 'Has anything dreadful happened? Is anybody ill? Is anybody dead? Has the Daleshire Bank broken?'

'None of those things has happened. Aunt Dora will tell you all by-and-by,' answered Morton gravely. 'The event which has come to pass to-night is something which ought to make us all glad; but it revives the sorrow of years gone by. You know what anniversary this is.'

'I wish I didn't,' exclaimed Tiny; 'I have been trying industriously to forget it all day.'

'I never try to forget,' said Horatia; 'I consider it a duty to remember. It is a small thing for us to give our dead father some of our thoughts on this day.'

Aunt Dora's soft brown eyes were full of tears.

She put her hand in Morton's, and went with him out of the room, and across the wide tessellated hall to her pretty nest at the back of the house.

The fire burned low on the tiled hearth. There was a moderator lamp on the table, which Morton lighted before he sat down. The room was the brightest and prettiest in the house. Here, as in the drawing-room, there were books, and flowers, and water-coloured pictures, and old china; but here everything had a peculiar grace and interesting individuality. There were indications of a life at once artistic and industrious—a drawing board with an unfinished flower study on the table in the window, a large bee-hive work basket in a corner by the hearth, one little table devoted to account books and the common-place details of house-keeping, another to Aunt Dora's favourite poets and philosophers, from Chaucer to Tennyson, from Erasmus to De Quincey.

Of all the pictures in the room there was one which caught the stranger's eye and arrested it. It was a portrait in water-colour, which hung above the chimney piece. The half-length figure of a man in

the prime of life—a frank, handsome face, bright blue eyes, crisply curling auburn hair, a broad forehead, a candid mouth,—a face supremely attractive and lovable, suggestive of an existence that had never been shadowed by grief or care, a soul untainted by one base thought.

This was the portrait of Walter Blake, painted two years before his death, at a time when he had recovered from the moderate amount of sorrow which he had felt for the loss of a somewhat uninteresting wife, never passionately loved. The picture had been painted as a birthday gift for the sister who worshipped him. It was the only likeness for which Walter Blake had ever consented to sit.

Morton looked up at the picture, as he took his seat beside the hearth. Never had the face seemed so life-like.

‘Tell me what has happened, Morton,’ said Dora Blake anxiously, but in no wise shaken from that abiding tranquility which was her greatest charm. ‘It is something that concerns my brother’s death, is it not? Some discovery has been made.’

‘Yes, there has been a discovery, and an important

one. My father's murderer has given himself up to justice. He will sleep to-night in Highclere jail.'

Dorothea's pale face blanched to a death-like whiteness.

'Great heaven,' she exclaimed, 'who—who—is the man?'

All her calmness was gone—her lips trembled so much that she could hardly form the words she wanted to speak

'A wretched creature—a half-starved tramp—more like a wolf than a man.'

'Thank God,' exclaimed Dorothea.

'Thank God,' echoed Morton. 'I do with all my heart thank God that retribution has come at last; that we shall have blood for blood. A poor compensation, for who could set such a creature's existence against my father's valuable life?'

'We are all of the same value in the sight of our Heavenly Father, Morton,' answered Aunt Dora, in her grave, sweet tones. 'In His sight we are all sinners. I am sorry for this unhappy creature whom remorse has driven to confess his crime.'

'Sorry! Sorry for the man who killed your

brother?' cried Morton indignantly. 'That may be Christianity, but it is a kind of Christianity I do not understand.'

'I am sorry for his sin and for the shameful death he will have to die!'

'And I am glad, heartily glad, savagely glad, if you like, Aunt Dora. I loved my father too well to be capable of this high-flown humanity of yours. I shall go to see the man hanged if the authorities will let me: and I shall feel happier when I see the drop fall and know that this one merciless villain has gone to his doom. Had he any mercy upon me when he killed my father?'

'All our passions are merciless, Morton,' answered his aunt, whose face and manner had recovered their customary repose. 'God who sees and understands all our evil propensities alone knows how short the distance is between innocence and crime. This unhappy wretch may have been goaded by miseries that neither you nor I can understand. We, who have so many advantages and yet are so prone to fall, ought to be merciful to the outcasts who have never known the light.'

Morton rose impatiently, and began to pace the room, just as he had paced Dulcie's room a few hours before.

'I cannot understand you,' he said. 'You seem to have no memory. Do you forget how my father's blood-bespattered corpse was brought home to this house? I was only seven years old, yet the feeling of that night, with all its horror and agony, are as vividly in my mind as if it were yesterday. I begin to think that no one loved my father as well as I did.'

'I loved him,' answered Aunt Dora quietly. 'You may believe that. I loved him as few brothers are loved. What would I not have done for him? What sacrifice would I have thought too great? My poor boy, you do not know what you are talking about.'

'Forgive me, dear auntie. I know you are all goodness. But I am angry to-night with every one who does not feel this as deeply as I do. I was angry with Dulcie—with Sir Everard.'

'With Sir Everard!' exclaimed Aunt Dora. 'Does he know——?'

‘It was to him the wretch declared his crime.’

‘How did Sir Everard take the revelation?’

‘With provoking coolness. He seemed to think the man an impostor, accusing himself of a crime he had not committed.’

‘Such things have happened,’ said his aunt thoughtfully.

‘Possibly; but this is no case of false accusation. The man was neither drunk nor mad—a brute, but a brute in the full possession of such senses as are given to brutes. Thank God he is in jail, hard and fast, by this time. There will be a trial; his crime will be brought home to him, and he will swing for it. Surely you must be glad of that, Aunt Dora?’

She shook her head with a mournful gesture, and looked at Morton with eyes full of tears.

‘Will my dear brother rest any easier in his grave because of his murderer’s doom? Will it make the thoughts of that cruel death—so awful, so sudden—a strong man cut down in his pride of manhood, full of thoughts and desires that belong to this world, with no time allowed him for one prayer, one act of faith and love—will that memory be any easier to bear,



Morton, because the wretch who did the deed shall have paid the price of his crime? No, my dear boy, there is no satisfaction to me in the idea of human retribution. "Vengeance is Mine, I will repay, saith the Lord." I have never doubted that my brother's murderer would be punished for his crime.'

'But do you not see in this event of to-night the finger of Providence? Here is a wretch so goaded by remorse that he is driven to seek death as a relief from the burden of his sin.'

'There must be some remnant of good in the man,' said Aunt Dora musingly. 'Even for him there may be pardon if his repentance be sincere.'

'You would pray for him and with him, I suppose?' said her nephew with a sneer.

'I would, Morton,' she answered quietly; and then, seeing his angry look, she went up to him, and laid her hand gently on his shoulder—such a pretty slender hand, as delicate as a girl's. 'Dear boy you and I see things with different eyes. You are young and I am old. Time alone can teach the lesson of forbearance and patience under great injuries. And now, dear Morton, go and eat your

supper, and try to get a good night's rest. You look worn and weary already, and you will have much excitement and anxiety to go through before this terrible business is finished. Good-night, dear boy ; tell your sisters I shall not come back to the drawing-room.'

' Shall I tell them what has happened ? '

' Not to-night. I will tell them to-morrow. Let them rest in peace to-night.'

And so Dora Blake dismissed her nephew, and then went back to the hearth above which the dead man's picture hung.

What a frank, bright face it was, smiling down at her, full of the joy and pride of life ! Great heaven, to see it thus, and to remember the ghastly face she had looked upon twenty years ago, the clotted hair, the lifeless form, bemired with duck-weed and clay, just as it had been dragged out of the ditch where the murderer had flung it.

Dora Blake covered her face with her hands, as if to shut out that dreadful image which memory recalled so vividly. She sank shuddering into her chair by the fireside and gave full vent to the passionate grief she had repressed in Morton's presence.

He had thought her cold and wanting in love for his dead father. His opinion would have been curiously different if he could have seen her now, the tears rolling down her pale cheeks, her slender form convulsed with sobs.

She grew calm at last, and lay back in her chair exhausted, gazing dreamily at the low fire.

‘Thank God it is not as I thought!’ she said to herself; ‘anything is better than that.’

Presently she rose and unlocked an escritoire, in which she kept all the sacred documents of her life—her diary, valued letters, mementoes of lost friends—all the story of the past, a history which she alone could decipher.

She opened a drawer and took out a packet of letters, tied with a yellow ribbon, and from beneath the letters a crimson morocco miniature case. She came back to her chair by the fire, and sat some minutes in a reverie, with the case and the packet lying in her lap. Then, with a sigh, she drew the lamp nearer to her, and opened the miniature case.

A Parisian photographer had given all the vividness of life to one of the fairest faces that ever

challenged his skill. It was a perfect face, lovely alike in feature and expression—smiling, yet with a look of latent sadness, gentle, pleading. The face of a woman born to love, and to be beloved, rather than to dazzle or command; assuredly not the face of a coquette, yet hardly the highest type of womanhood. There was a faint suggestion of weakness in the sensitive lips, the small dimpled chin. It was a countenance of childlike innocence and purity, but with no promise of the grander virtues—heroism, fortitude, self-denial. Dora Blake sat gazing long at the lovely image, lost in a dream of the past.

‘How well I could have loved her, poor child,’ she sighed. ‘How happy we all might have been, if fate had so willed.’

Then, rousing herself from sad, regretful thoughts, she untied the yellow ribbon and looked slowly through the packet of letters. They were in a woman’s hand, a small and delicate writing, with many a sentence underlined, as if to give intensity to words which in themselves were passionate. Miss Blake only looked at a page here and there, a line, a phrase, sighing as she read. What vehement, eager life there

had been in the writer of those words ; how heart and mind had gone with the hand ; and yet within a year the hand had been dust, the passionate heart had been still for ever !

‘It is too sad a story,’ said Miss Blake, as she rearranged the packet and tied the yellow ribbon round those faded letters—‘the history of a broken heart.’

She replaced the packet and the photograph in her drawer, and locked the escritoire.

Presently there came a gentle tap at the door.

‘Come in,’ said Miss Blake, a little vexed at being disturbed.

The door was opened quietly, and Lizzie Hardman peeped in.

‘May I come in for a few minutes, auntie, just to say a word or two?’

‘Oh, is it you, child? Yes, you may come. I don’t mind you.’

Lizzie crept softly to Aunt Dora’s side and put her arm round her neck and kissed her, without a word. Everybody was fond of Aunt Dora, but her nieces used to protest that Lizzie’s affection was absurd in its demonstrative devotion. Yet Lizzie

Hardman was by no means demonstrative in any other relation of life. Her love for her benefactress seemed the one only warm feeling in her nature.

‘She is extremely obliging, and will fetch and carry for us like a dog, and put up with our tempers in the sweetest way,’ said Horatia, ‘but, in spite of her sweetness, I don’t believe she cares a straw for Clementine or me. Her idolatry of auntie is absolutely preposterous.’

‘I don’t see that, Horry,’ answered Tiny; ‘Aunt Dora is such a delicious creature. Nobody can help loving her.’

‘Yet Aunt Dora might wear damp boots for a whole evening before you would run to fetch her slippers,’ retorted Horatia with some justice, for Tiny’s weak point was selfishness.

‘Well, Lizzie, what do you want?’ asked Miss Blake, after she had submitted to the girl’s kiss.

‘I know something has happened. I was afraid you might be unhappy. Morton looked so pale—so terribly excited. Oh, auntie, is it anything very dreadful, anything that will lead to unhappiness? He said we ought all to be glad: but his own manner was so strange.’

‘How anxious you are about Morton.’

‘And about you,’ said Lizzie, ‘you have been crying. I can see that. Let me go to your room with you, auntie dear, and read you to sleep. I know you will be giving way to sad memories if I don’t.’

‘Well, you shall come with me if you like, Lizzie. A few pages of Tennyson or Browning will be more soothing than my thoughts. Don’t ask me any questions. You will hear everything to-morrow.’

‘I can wait,’ answered Lizzie.

‘Have the girls gone to bed?’

‘Half-an-hour ago. Morton had a little supper in the dining-room, very little, it was a mere pretence of eating, and then he went up to his room. He looks dreadfully ill.’

‘He has had a shock.’

‘Poor fellow! But it is nothing about Miss Courtenay.’

‘No, she is unconcerned in the business.’

‘That is a blessing,’ said Lizzie, as they went slowly up the broad staircase, to the lofty modern-looking corridor from which the bedrooms opened

## CHAPTER VIII.

### IN THE ASSIZE COURT.

HUMPHREY VARGAS had been six weeks in prison, and now the assizes were on at Highclere, and the self-accused murderer was to be judged. The county police had not been idle during the interval. They had hunted up witnesses, and traced out various details in the history of Walter Blake's death which tended to confirm the prisoner's statement, and to establish the fact of his guilt.

Among the lower classes there had been some sympathy for the self-accused, after the Highclere magistrates had heard his confession and committed him for trial. The murder was brutal, and Mr. Blake, of Tangley Manor, had been one of the most popular men in the county. Among the gentry, therefore, the general feeling was that hanging would be only too light a punishment for the murderer; but the working classes dwelt on the fact of the



man's surrender of himself after twenty years; his age and infirmities, his dire poverty, the manifold temptations to which a starving wretch is liable. Radical orators in roadside beershops improved the occasion by denouncing the luxury and self-indulgence of the rich.

'Why, there wasn't a horse in Squire Blake's stable as wasn't better fed and better cared for than this pore crittur,' said one of these village Hampdens, lashing himself into a fury. 'Horses, indeed! I should like to know what working man's home can compare with a loose box in a hunting stable; what working man's child has as comfortable quarters as a fox-hound pup? Ah!' cried the orator, thumping the table, 'the rich man may lay field to field, and add house to house, but at the battle of Armageddon—' and here another thump on the table made the crockery mugs rattle, and closed the speech in sublime obscurity.

The day had come at last when Humphrey Vargas was to stand in the dock, and the little county town of Highclere was in a state of unusual excitement. It was a queer little old-fashioned town, a century

behind the times in almost everything, a picturesque little town, with a fine old Norman gateway at each end, narrow streets in which the greater part of the houses had been standing since the days of the Tudors—streets in which the levels had undergone all manner of changes, so that while in one street the houses were elevated ten or fifteen feet above the carriage way, and were approached by a raised causeway, in other thoroughfares the basement floors were sunk several feet below the level of the pavement, and one descended into the house as into a vault.

Daleshire could boast of larger towns and better towns than Highclere. There was Blackford, the great iron town; and there was Avonmore, an elegant modern settlement, where the wealthy Blackfordians retired from the smoke of foundries and the labour of money-making, to clear air and conifer-shaded gardens, and the relaxation of money-spending. There was Doldrum, the busy manufacturing town; famous for glasscloths, round towels, and lawn-mowing machines; where there were two fine churches, and a population of sixty thousand, which

subsisted chiefly on pork pies. But superior in size and prosperity as these might be, Highclere had merits of its own, and ranked above them. Everything about it belonged to the Middle Ages—the church, the old gateways, the neighbouring castle, the grammar-school, the town hall, the picturesque old one-arch bridge that spanned the narrow river, the verdant water-meadows and willow-shaded streams that surrounded the town—all belonged to the England which is fast passing away: and people with a taste for the picturesque loved the stagnation of Highclere better than the commercial prosperity of dingy Blackford and pork-eating Doldrum, or the wealth and fashion of elegant Avonmore.

The jail where Humphrey Vargas had been in close keeping ever since that October night, was a building hardly worthy of the dignity of Highclere. There was a portion of it that was of immemorial antiquity, and which archæological societies visited and discoursed learnedly about; and there was a portion which was comparatively modern, having been built in the time of Queen Anne. Despite the

present rage for all architecture of that Augustine era, it must be confessed that the modern side of Highclere jail was about as insignificant and paltry a piece of construction as ever was devised by a local architect for the disfigurement of his native town. It was a square block, having for its façade a flat wall, level with the street, and pierced with numerous narrow windows. An enthusiast might have pardoned the ugliness of the edifice, inasmuch as it was built of a dingy red brick, scantily relieved by stone tablets above the windows : but despite this unquestionable merit, Highclere jail was about the ugliest thing in the town, and even the native mind took no pride or pleasure in it.

The ancient portion of the prison was at the back of this modern erection, and was altogether curious and picturesque. It had once been an arsenal, and the massive walls were pierced with narrow loophole windows, which admitted only a glimmering light into the low cells. It was built on the rocky bank of a deep, narrow river, which rushed impetuously six feet below the foundations of the prison. Seen from the low ground on the other side of the stream, the

building looked more like a mediæval stronghold than a nineteenth century prison.

Within there was a quadrangle, in which the prisoners took their daily walks, and where executions—happily rare in Highclere—were decently performed.

The morning was gray and drizzly, and the old town looked as dull and gray as the weather, despite the unwonted excitement of a trial for murder. The court was to open at eleven, and at ten o'clock Morton Blake rode into the town, and put his horse up at the Peacock, the old coaching inn, where a range of empty stables testified to a departed prosperity, but which still boasted an assembly room, a professed cook, gave decent dinners, accommodated the sprinkling of hunting men who preferred a quiet life and plenty of space for their horses to the liveliness and fashion of Avonmore, and was honourably known as the best hotel in Highclere.

Morton gave his horse to the ostler, and walked away through the drizzling rain, without entering the inn. He looked pale and careworn. The last six weeks had been full of excitement and anxiety for

him. He had been in constant communication with the county police, had followed all their movements with feverish intensity of feeling, and had even employed a London detective on his own account, unknown to the local police. The result of this double investigation had been curiously disappointing. The county police had made numerous discoveries, and were convinced of the prisoner's guilt. The London detective, recommended as a man of exceptional intelligence and capacity, had done nothing save to throw cold water upon the entire business, and to express his doubt of the prisoner's guilt. Disgusted at so barren a result, Morton had dismissed the man in a huff, and pinned his faith upon local talent. And now the day had come upon which Humphrey Vargas was to be tried for his life by a jury of his own countrymen. Morton Blake walked past the assize court where the trial was to be held, past the prison, which lay nearer the gate of the town, under the old archway, with its heraldic griffins on each side of the gate, to the stone bridge which spanned the narrow river that went brawling and gurgling over its rocky bed to find a lower level

and to spread and widen at its ease in the water meadows below.

From this bridge Morton could see the back of the jail, and he stood for some time leaning against the parapet, and gazing at the old building, speculating as to which of yonder loopholes lighted Humphrey Vargas's cell. He knew that the prisoner was lodged in that part of the building, though he had paid no visit of mercy or curiosity to his cell. His feelings were too intense to admit of his having any intercourse with the criminal.

He went back to the town and entered the court by a side door, which admitted him into one of the official rooms. He was known to all the local functionaries, and was provided with a seat on the Bench, from which he could survey the whole of the proceedings. The court-house was filling fast, for this trial of Humphrey Vargas was an event which had been awaited with interest and curiosity by everyone in the neighbourhood of Austhorpe. Gentry and commonalty were alike concerned in seeing the issue of to-day's trial. Morton had scarcely taken his seat when Mrs. Aspinall, of the Towers, was ushered to a

place near him, and came rustling to her seat, exhaling odours of Ess bouquet, and exclaiming at the stuffiness of the atmosphere. Lord Blatchmardean and his son, Lord Beville, followed almost immediately, saluting Morton with friendly nods as they took their places, and seizing an early opportunity to shake hands with him, and murmur something vaguely sympathetic.

The body of the old hall was full of people, a crowd which overflowed at the doorway and oozed down the stone steps into the lobbies. Everybody wanted to see the prisoner, to hear what course the trial would take. Would the man plead guilty, and the whole thing be over in a quarter of an hour; or would the evidence be sifted, and witnesses interrogated in the usual way? Popular feeling was in favour of a long and careful trial, and there was considerable relief of mind when some one who was supposed to be an authority asserted that the high sheriff of the county had provided the prisoner with counsel, and that he had been instructed to plead not guilty, in order that he might have a fair trial.

‘There’s Morton Blake,’ said a big, jovial-looking



man, with a bald head, and large sandy whiskers, who had come late, yet had contrived to edge himself into one of the best places in the body of the hall on a raised bench just behind the table at which the counsel sat. 'Looks pale and drawn, doesn't he? Takes this business very seriously to heart. And there's Mother Aspinall, grinning at the high sheriff, with those false teeth of hers, and posing herself like a fashionable beauty in a photograph. And there's Sir Everard Courtenay just come in, shaking hands with Morton, and looking like a man whose thoughts are a thousand miles away. And there's old Blatchmardean—regular old roarer—and his son Beville—fine up-standing young fellow, the best bred un in these parts.'

Thus Shafto Jebb, the surgeon of Highclere, who knew everybody present, and was as good as a chorus. He was a hunting man, and although his professional dealings had to do with the ills of humanity, his inclinations pointed to the stable, and he was more horsey in his phraseology than the average veterinary surgeon.

'He's a handsome young man, certainly,' answered

the gentleman to whom these remarks had been addressed, Mr. Mawk, a mild young curate, of the advanced Anglican school, who had charge of the rural parish of Austhorpe, while his fettered spirit panted for the freedom of Brighton or Maida Vale; 'but I think Sir Everard Courtenay is even more aristocratic looking—what I should call the true patrician type.'

'Too fine drawn for my taste,' replied Jebb, 'I don't care for your bookish men. I like a fellow who can go across country. Lord Beville is one of the finest riders in Daleshire.'

'Sir Everard used to hunt once, used he not?'

'Twenty years ago. Yes, he was out on the day of Blake's murder. A very poor run, I remember, though some of us took some ticklish fences. It was early in the season, and the hedges were all blind.'

'You remember the day?'

'Better than I remember the day before yesterday. I was a gay young bachelor, and could afford to keep four horses where I now keep two, and hadn't to work half so hard as I do now. Ah, those were glorious days.'

‘Not very complimentary to Mrs. Jebb,’ simpered Mr. Mawk, the curate.

‘Mrs. Jebb is a good soul—no man ever had a better wife. But a man can only be young once, Mawk, and however well things may go with him in after life, he will always look back to the days of his youth with a sigh.’

‘I suppose there is no question as to this man’s guilt?’ speculated Mr. Mawk, who was more interested in the proceedings of the court than in Shafto Jebb’s opinions.

‘I’ll tell you what I think about it when the trial’s over,’ answered Jebb warily. ‘If I were to go into the witness-box I might be able to put some points in a new light; but I’m not a witness, and I don’t want to be one.’

‘What could you tell?’ asked the curate eagerly. ‘Do you really know anything?’

‘I might elucidate a point,’ said Jebb. ‘But let it pass. Here comes the prisoner; looks a poor dough-hearted animal, doesn’t he? How savagely Morton Blake eyes him. That young man is awfully vindictive.’

Every eye was now directed to the man in the dock ; a haggard, broken-down creature, with bent shoulders, hollow cheeks, long, lean arms, grizzled unkempt hair—a man who looked as if he had been acquainted with starvation and houselessness for the greater part of his life. He looked round the court with a scared, half-dazzled expression, as of one suddenly brought from darkness into light; and then, seeing every eye gazing at him, eager, curious, and un pitying, he gave a shudder, and sank cowering down in a heap in the chair that had been provided for him.

Then the jury were sworn, and the prisoner was arraigned. In answer to the usual interrogation he pleaded not guilty. And then the counsel for the Crown, Mr. Canning Russell, Q.C., briefly stated the facts for the prosecution: how at seven o'clock on the evening of the twentieth of October, just twenty years ago, Mr. Blake, of Tangley Manor, had been found by some labourers, going home from their work, lying dead in a ditch in Austhorpe Lane, his skull fractured by some blunt instrument; how at the coroner's inquest the medical evidence had shown

that the fracture of the skull was the cause of death, and that the murderer must have dragged his victim's dead body into the ditch ; how the watch, chain, and seals known to have been worn by Mr. Blake on this day, had been discovered three months afterwards at a pawnbroker's in the market town of Great Barford in the next county ; and how the pawnbroker who took them in pledge had been able, even after the lapse of twenty years, to select Humphrey Vargas out of six men being exercised in the yard of the prison ; how it would be proved to the satisfaction of the jury that the shape of the prisoner's feet, notably the position of the left foot, which turned inward when he walked, had been found to correspond exactly with the drawings taken of foot-marks in the path beside the ditch and in the field beyond it immediately after the murder ; how a tramp who had been hop-picking in Kent with Vargas a fortnight prior to the murder, and had known him to be penniless at that time, had met him a week after the murder in Blackford, and had been treated by him at a public-house there, and had reason to know that he was then flush of money. The counsel for the prosecution then went on to say

how the police had traced the career of Humphrey Vargas since that time, in jail and out of jail, an altogether disreputable and criminal existence. Indeed, looking at the mode and manner of the man's life, his associates and surroundings, the wonder in most people's minds would be, not that he had committed one murder, but that he had not committed many.

The first witness called was one whose appearance in the box created considerable excitement in the court, an excitement which was subdued but universal. There was a hush, a breathlessness, a sudden concentration of every one's attention, as Sir Everard Courtenay stepped into the witness-box and was sworn.

'A remarkably handsome man,' murmured Mrs. Aspinall, adjusting her binoculars on her aristocratic nose, 'and very young for his age—remarkably well preserved.'

Mrs. Aspinall, who had evaded the approach of gray hairs by dying her tresses a warm tawny tinge, which she called the Titian red, and had coated her wrinkles with a wash of bismuth might have said with much more truth that Sir

Everard looked young because he was not preserved at all, having done nothing to disguise the progress of years, and looking handsomer with his silvered hair and beard than any man ever looked with dyed hair or a wig.

Sir Everard being interrogated told in fewest words how Humphrey Vargas had come to him on the evening of October the twentieth, and had voluntarily made the statement, which he, Sir Everard, had written down, and which the prisoner had afterwards signed in the presence of John Jackson, the constable.

Mr. Tomplin, counsel for the prisoner, asked the witness if Vargas had been drinking when he made this statement.

Sir Everard : No, the man was, to all appearance, perfectly sober.

Mr. Tomplin : And there was nothing wild or excited about his manner ?

Sir Everard : I should describe his manner as dogged rather than excited. I was at first inclined to pooh-pooh his statement, believing the whole thing to be a trumped-up business, and that he

would recant next day. I afterwards warned him that it was a very serious matter, and that he was putting a rope round his neck. He was a miserable, half-starved looking creature, and I thought that he had been driven by desperation to give himself in charge for an imaginary offence.

Mr. Tomplin : Did he impress you as a man who was mentally weak ?

Sir Everard : No. He spoke rationally enough, and he resolutely adhered to his first statement.

Mr. Tomplin : You were a friend of the murdered man, I believe ?

Sir Everard : Yes, we were friends of long standing.

Mr. Tomplin : And you rode by his side part of the way home from the hunt ?

Sir Everard : No. I was not among the gentlemen who rode homewards with him as far as the cross roads, after the kill. I went home earlier, and by a different way.

Mr. Tomplin : When and where did you last see him ?

Sir Everard : On Giltspur Common, after a sharp



run of twenty minutes or so, when the hounds were at fault, and we waited about a little.

Mr. Tomplin : Did you speak to him ?

Sir Everard : Yes, we talked together for a few minutes.

Mr. Tomplin : Was he in his usual health and spirits ?

Sir Everard looked at the judge with a bored expression, as who should say that this kind of interrogation might go on all day, to no apparent end or aim. Mr. Tomplin was a youngish man, five-and-thirty at most, who had only lately begun to get briefs, and whose enthusiasm required to be kept in check.

‘ Really now,’ said the judge, ‘ I cannot quite see the drift of these questions. You cannot surely mean to suggest that Mr. Blake committed suicide ? That a gentleman split his own skull with a cudgel, and then laid himself down in a ditch, after picking his own pockets.’

‘ No, my lord, but I wish to show that Mr. Blake may have had an enemy, that this murder, which startled all the country round, and which for twenty

years has been a mystery, may have been prompted by stronger and more subtle passions than the sordid craving for gain. I should like the jury to hear something of Mr. Blake's circumstances and surroundings before his death.'

Sir Everard, with a contemptuous smile : Mr. Blake was in his usual health, he appeared to be in particularly good spirits, he conversed freely with his friends.

Mr. Tomplin : Did you, who were his intimate friend, know of any domestic or social trouble in which he was involved at this time ?

Sir Everard : I should say that his domestic surroundings were rather enviable than otherwise. He had been some years a widower, he had three children to whom he was strongly attached, and his house was kept for him by his maiden sister, one of the most amiable women in Daleshire.

Mr. Tomplin : Yet there might have been secret trouble. I am obliged to touch upon a most delicate subject, and I wish to approach it with all possible respect. Is it not a fact, Sir Everard, that Mr. Blake was one of Lady Courtenay's most ardent admirers ?

Sir Everard : When Lady Courtenay was Miss Alice Rothney she had numerous admirers. I believe Mr. Blake was among them.

Mr. Tomplin : But he conquered his passion when she married you. Do I understand that there was never any uncomfortable feeling between you and Mr. Blake after your marriage ?

Sir Everard : Mr. Blake and I were on friendly terms till the day of his death. I have told you that already. I shall be glad, sir, if you can keep my dead wife's name out of this inquiry. It can have no possible bearing on the case.

The judge here intervened, and ruled that the line which the cross-examination was taking was irrelevant, and must be pursued no further.

Humphrey Vargas's deposition was now read, amidst breathless silence, and then John Dyke, a bricklayer's labourer, was sworn.

Mr. Canning Russell : You were one of the men who found Mr. Blake's body. Will you tell the jury exactly what happened to you ?

John Dyke : Me and my mate, Joe Daffles, was going home after our day's work at Farmer Twycross's,

at Austhorpe. We'd been workin' a bit late, for we was puttin' up a new brew-'us', and Muster Twycross was in a fantig to get it up in time for his October brewin', and he'd made it agreeable to us to work a hour or two overtime; so, as you see, it were after dark when we was agoin' home by Austhorpe Lane. There was a moon up, a newish sort of a moon, that didn't give much light, but just enough for us to see objicks in the road; and we was a joggin' along like, a bit slow, bein' as we was tired, when my mate sees somethin' in the ditch—just at the very identical moment as my eye were caught by a smashed hat lying in a puddle on the other side o' the road, close to Blatchmardean Copse. 'What's this here in the ditch,' says he, scared like. 'Is it a dog or a man?' and he plunges in without more ado, and me after him, and between us drags out something smothered with mud and weeds; it was a man sure enough. We thought at first as it might be somebody that had been overcome with liquor, and had fallen asleep on the bank, and rolled into the ditch promiscuous like, but when we got him out into the road, we could see his red coat and brass buttons, and his top boots, and

we know'd it was a gent as had been huntin', which a few yards further on we finds his whip lying alongside the footpath. Well, we makes pretty sure as how he'd gone at the hedge and his hoss had throw'd him, and just landed him clean in the ditch. Anyway, he was dead, that was clear enough; so my mate ran back to Austhorpe to get help while I sat down beside the body. He comes back in less than a hour with the constable and another man, and a lantern, and a shutter to carry the body upon, and no sooner does the constable hold the lantern alongside the dead man's face than he sings out, 'It's Squire Blake of Tangley Manor. Here's a dreadful piece of business—throw'd from his hoss and killed on the spot,' for at first, you see, he thought azackly like us. Well, we up with the body and laid it on the shutter, and carried it home to Tangley Manor, where we was 'andsomely recompensed for our trouble.

Mr. Russell: Your mate is dead I understand?

John Dyke: Yes, sir, pore old Joe took and died seven year ago last Chrisselmas. There never was such a marther to skyatics as Joe were afore he was took.

Mr. Russell : That will do.

The next witness was Dr. Brudenel, of Highclere, a formal old gentleman of a fast-expiring species, the ancient family practitioner. He gave his evidence in a lofty and grandiose manner, and used as many scientific and technical words as he could possibly employ, in order to inform the jury that Mr. Blake had died from the effects of wounds inflicted on the head by a blunt instrument, most probably a stake or cudgel. There had been three wounds, all of a severe character, and sufficient to account for death. There was no doubt in Dr. Brudenel's mind that the deceased expired almost immediately from the effects of one or all of those wounds, and that he was a dead man when he fell or was thrown into the ditch.

In cross-examination Mr. Tomplin asked whether such wounds might not have been caused accidentally by a fall, if Mr. Blake had tried to jump the hedge into the road and had been flung violently out of his saddle.

Dr. Brudenel : I have no hesitation in saying that it would be impossible for three such wounds to be inflicted accidentally. Nor have I any hesitation in

saying that no hunting man would take such a jump as you suggest in cold blood, riding home after a day's sport. No judicious rider would take it at any time, as there is a drop of five feet into a hard road.

Mr. Tomplin: You told us just now that, in your opinion, the wounds were inflicted by a cudgel or a stake. Now, would not a wound inflicted by a stake be of a very different character from that caused by a cudgel?

Dr. Brudenel: There would be a difference certainly.

Mr. Tomplin: A marked difference, would there not?

Dr. Brudenel: The wound inflicted by a stake would be jagged. The flesh would be much abraded, supposing the edge of the stake to be sharp and pointed. The blow from a cudgel would cause a contused wound.

Mr. Tomplin: Now, Dr. Brudenel, were not these wounds obviously caused by a stake?

Dr. Brudenel: That was my impression at the time, an impression which was in some manner borne out by the subsequent discovery of a hole in a bank

about a quarter of a mile from the scene of the murder, from which a stake had evidently been recently pulled up, apparently with violence or haste.

Mr. Tomplin : Was the spot in question nearer Austhorpe than the scene of the murder ?

Dr. Brudenel : Nearer the Highclere Road.

The counsel for the defence scored a point by Dr. Brudenel's evidence. Humphrey Vargas had described himself as striking Mr. Blake with a cudgel. This suggestion of a stake torn from a hedge near the scene of the murder introduced a new element of doubt into the case.



## CHAPTER IX.

### GUILTY.

THE next witness was a man who had known Humphrey Vargas when he lived at Austhorpe, and who identified him as an agricultural labourer who had worked at one time for Mr. Blake, and had occupied a cottage on his estate. This man described how Vargas had offended Mr. Blake by poaching on the Tangley preserves, and how he and his wife had been turned out of their home, neck and crop, a day or two before the birth of his last child. The wife died within a week of her confinement, and Vargas had attributed her death to the agitation and discomfort caused by their sudden shift of quarters, from a decent weather-tight cottage to a wretched hovel in one of the lanes near Austhorpe. He had expressed himself strongly about Mr. Blake's conduct, and had shown himself vindictive. Soon after his wife's death he left Austhorpe, abandoning his young

family to the care of the parish. The wife had been a steady, hardworking woman, but Vargas had been scampishly disposed at his best, not an habitual drunkard, but going on the drink at odd times, and inclined to be idle. Of this witness Mr. Tomplin declined to ask any questions.

Then came the evidence of the Great Barford pawnbroker, at whose shop Vargas had pledged Mr. Blake's watch and chain, and who had been able to pick him out from among six men, and identify him, without a minute's hesitation. This witness was searchingly interrogated by Mr. Tomplin, who did all he could to shake his testimony, and to make him appear a twaddling old fool, but without success.

After this followed the evidence of the late police constable of Austhorpe, a toothless old man who had been superannuated twelve years ago, but whose memory seemed unimpaired by time. He described how he had assisted at the tracing of footprints in the muddy road, hardened by a night's frost, which footprints had been since found to correspond with the form and size of the prisoner's feet with singular dis-

tinctness. Here, again, the counsel for the defence tried the forensic art of ridicule, but with no more effect than in the case of the pawnbroker, save so far as the eliciting of some idle laughter from the groundlings.

The next and last witness was the tramp, William Scaffers, otherwise Carrotty Bill, who deposed to being in Vargas's company in the hopfields, near Cobham, in Kent, and parting with him on the road to Dale-shire. He described how they had afterwards met by accident in Blackford, and how Vargas had then been flush of coin.

'He'd done a job somewheres in the country as had put a few pounds in his pocket, he ses,' pursued Mr. Scaffers, who discoursed as freely and as pleasantly in the witness-box as if he had been sitting by a taproom fire. His easy attitude, as he lolled with folded arms upon the front of the box, was calculated to assure the jury of his perfect candour and friendliness! He kept a bit of straw at one corner of his mouth, which he chewed occasionally, as if for refreshment, and he occasionally spat, in a gentlemanly manner, upon the floor of the box. 'He

stood sam for a pot o' pongelo,' continued Mr. Scaffers, 'and narchurly we got talkin'. He told me he meant to go across the 'erring pond and try his luck in Meriky as soon as the winter was over. I arst him if he'd got enough money to pay his passage, and he ses he has ; and I ses that must ha' been a profitable job as he'd done in Daleshire ; and he ses it were a bit o' luck, and no mistake, and he only wished he could be as lucky every month in the year, and then he wouldn't quarrel with fortune nor with nobody.'

Mr. Tomplin, in cross-examination, bore rather hardly upon the witness, but was able neither to shake Mr. Scaffers' testimony nor to disturb his equanimity. He was quite agreeable to answer any number of questions that might be put to him, and seemed to look upon the whole business as a pleasant chat, which gave free scope to his conversational powers. He explained the meaning of various slang words, which had given colour and vividness to his phraseology. He told the jury that pongelo was a familiar name for half-and-half, and further explained that half-and-half was a mixture of ale and porter.

Nothing could be more affable than his manner to the counsel, save perhaps those nods and winks with which he sought to establish an understanding between himself and the jury.

‘May I inquire how much of your life has been spent out of jail during the last twenty years?’ asked Mr. Tomplin.

‘That’s a pint of heliquette for his honour to decide,’ answered the imperturbable Scaffers. ‘I should call it a hunwarrantable invasion of a gentleman’s private life.’

‘That will do, sir ; I think you have wasted the time of this Court quite long enough,’ said Mr. Tomplin shortly.

‘I leave it to the jury’s own powers to diskiver which of us two has been a fritterin’ away their valuable time since eleven o’clock this morning,’ answered Scaffers.

This closed the case for the prosecution. Mr. Tomplin then began his defence.

He started by admitting that he had a difficult task before him. Here was a man who stood before them self-accused of a terrible crime, whose own lips

had given the chief evidence against him ; a man who had of his own free will surrendered his liberty and invited the last punishment which the law could inflict. Yet in the face of this confession he should ask the jury to consider the case before them with minds unprejudiced by the prisoner's own statement, and to examine that statement as if it had been the evidence of an independent witness. He asked them to consider that there was actually nothing in all they had heard to-day to connect the prisoner with the murder of Walter Blake, though there was certainly some ground for believing that he had become possessed of the murdered man's watch and chain, and had converted them for his own benefit.

‘ You have been told by Dr. Brudenel,’ pursued Mr. Tomplin, ‘ that in his opinion, both at the time of the inquest and at the present time, the wounds from which Mr. Blake died were inflicted by a sharp-edged, jagged piece of wood, such as a hedge-stake, and not by the smooth knob of a cudgel. I ask you, gentlemen, to consider this point in the evidence; and I ask you still more closely to consider the palpable improbabilities in the tale told by the

prisoner. You are asked to believe that he, a half-starved tramp, footsore and weary, was able to stop Mr. Blake, a powerful man, mounted on a powerful horse; that he was able to drag him off his horse and so belabour him with a cudgel that he died. Does it not seem more reasonable to suppose, gentlemen, that the murderer of Mr. Blake was a man of his own age, of powerful frame, like his own, mounted as well as he was mounted, able to attack him upon equal terms; not a poor crawling hound whom the squire of Tangleby could have swept out of his path as he would have spurned any four-footed cur that yelped and snapped at his horse's legs? Gentlemen, you have to look deeper than this starving wayfarer's hunger for the motive of this crime. You have to look for a great wrong and a desperate revenge. You have to look for one of those terrible domestic mysteries which underlie the smooth surface of society. You have to scrutinize the garbled page before you and to read between the lines.

‘ And now, gentlemen, as for the motive of this confession—the motive which can impel a man, at large, unsuspected, free to breathe the air of heaven,

to give up his liberty and imperil his life? I think you will find it easier to discover a motive, or motives, strong enough to induce an innocent man to accuse himself of a crime which he has not committed, than to reconcile the improbabilities in the prisoner's account of a supposed murder. We all know of that thirst for notoriety which exists in some uneducated minds—a morbid desire to astonish—to be talked about and pointed at and thought famous, were it after the vilest fashion. Such a desire may have influenced the prisoner when he leapt in a moment from the dull obscurity of want and houselessness to the distinction of a supposed murderer: a man to be interviewed by newspaper correspondents, and to have his portrait in the penny dreadfuls. Gentlemen, we make too much of our criminals. There is a Victoria Cross for crime, as there is for valour. A man springs into fame as surely by the commission of a monstrous crime as a general by winning a great battle. We have made a step towards civilization by doing away with public hangings; but we shall make a longer step into the light when we cease to gloat over the



details of crime, and to award the glory of a wax-work apotheosis to the thief and the assassin. The thirst for notoriety, gentlemen, is one obvious motive for such a confession ; add to this the desperation of a wretch whose only freedom was the liberty to starve by the wayside or to rot in a ditch. Perhaps, had the workhouse been more accessible, Humphrey Vargas would not have thrown himself into jail ; but who would hesitate, as a mere question of personal comfort, between the casual ward and the convict prison ? Homeless, in rags, starving, Vargas saw but one certain refuge open to him, and that refuge was a jail. He had tasted its comforts before as a common felon ; he pined for the more indulgent treatment given to a murderer. He reckoned on the chances against the extreme penalty of the law. He argued with himself that an old man, moved by remorse, penitent, abject, confessing to a crime committed twenty years ago, would be sure of lenient treatment. Mercy would intervene to modify the severity of the sentence. He risked the hazard of the die, and stands before you to-day, bearing on his countenance the stamp of his

character, a product of our nineteenth century civilization, untaught, unfed, unclothed, uncared for, a creature whose final hope on earth is the decent shelter of a jail.'

Mr. Canning Russell replied with sober brevity to the arguments for the defence. He said that a man who accused himself of a murder was, unless mad or drunk at the time of his confession, supposed to know his own mind. This man had been neither drunk nor mad. He had given a consecutive narrative, a narrative sustained by the evidence, medical and otherwise. Mr. Russell alluded with some contempt to the nice distinction between a wound from a stake and one caused by a bludgeon or cudgel.

'Gentlemen,' he exclaimed, 'I do not believe the whole College of Surgeons would be able to tell one from the other.'

He dwelt on the identification of the prisoner by the pawnbroker to whom he had pledged Mr. Blake's watch and chain. This was conclusive evidence as to the robbery, and was it not too much for any reasonable mind to suppose that the robbery and the murder were two distinct crimes committed by two

distinct criminals, each acting independently of the other? Surely the man who disposed of Mr. Blake's property must be the man who murdered him for the sake of that property. He had to remind the jury what very small gains had been the motive of murder in many cases that must have come within their knowledge. As to the argument that a tramp, on foot, was no match for Mr. Blake on horseback, it had to be considered that the tramp was a man who had led a rough out-of-door life, and belonged already, in a measure, to the criminal classes, a man whose thews and sinews were practised in deeds of violence, and further, that a gentleman, walking his horse home from the hunt, after a long day's hard riding, could hardly be in the full possession of his normal strength, but was in all likelihood exhausted and weary.

Mr. Russell concluded, after briefly glancing at some further points in the defence, and then the judge summed up, briefly, severely, taking care to remind the jury that the fact of a crime having been committed twenty years ago was no extenuating circumstance, that the prisoner's remorse could in no

wise lessen the enormity of his guilt ; that if it seemed to them that he had done this deed of which he stood accused out of his own mouth, he must pay the penalty of his crime. His case had been carefully heard. He had been ably and exhaustively defended. They were not to be carried away by oratory. They were not even to be influenced by natural pity for a wretch so abject. Their duty was to arrive at their verdict upon the evidence they had heard, looking at plain facts in the sober light of common sense.

The jury retired, and in less than twenty minutes returned to the box, and after the usual formalities the jury returned the verdict 'guilty.'

Then came the solemn closing act of the day. The judge put on the black cap and addressed the prisoner. Coldly, gravely, he reminded the shivering wretch of the magnitude of his crime, and told him what his fate was to be. There had been no recommendation to mercy from the jury. There was no hint of a possible commutation of the sentence from the judge. The short winter day had worn to its close before this climax was reached ; wax candles

had been lighted here and there, and the yellow flames were reflected on the black oak panneling as in turbid water. The faces in the crowded court had all the same wan, strained look in the dim and unequal light. There were strange effects of light and shade, as in a picture by Rembrandt. The figures of the officials moving to and fro in the dusk had a goblin look. The judge projected a monstrous shadow of his wig and gown upon the ceiling. The dark crimson draperies looked black, as if the court had been draped for a funeral.

Mrs. Aspinall shook out the sable tails on the edge of her mantle and gave a shuddering sigh.

‘I had no idea the trial of a poor common creature could be made so interesting,’ she said to Sir Everard Courtenay, who sat near her. ‘How wonderfully clever those counsel are, and how warmly they enter into it; just as if they really cared what became of the poor creature, don’t you know? But I’m rather glad it’s all over, as I ordered my carriage for four o’clock, and those poor chestnuts of mine must have been shivering for the last three-quarters

of an hour. Would it be too much for me to ask you to see me through the crowd ?'

'I shall be delighted,' said Sir Everard.

'Your pretty little daughter ought to have been here to-day,' observed the frivolous matron ; 'she has lost a treat.'

'I should be very sorry for my daughter to see such a painful scene.'

'But really, now ; it was all so quietly done, and those barristers are such gentlemanly creatures. There was nothing to offend the most sensitive mind.

'Perhaps not ; but I am glad Dulcie was out of it,' replied Sir Everard gravely. 'May I offer you my arm ?'

He led the lady to her carriage, which was waiting in front of the assize court.

'Shall I drive you home ?' asked Mrs. Aspinall, when she was seated in her snug brougham. 'It won't be far out of my way to go through Austhorpe.'

'You are very good, but I have my horse here, and I must ride home as fast as I can to dress for the sheriff's dinner.'

'You are going to dine with Sir Nathaniel ?'

‘Yes, I am to meet the judge and the leading counsel.’

‘And you will have a delightful opportunity of talking over the trial. I quite envy you. Shall you ride home by Austhorpe Lane, past the scene of the murder?’

‘Naturally, since that is the shortest way and the best road.’

‘Have you not a vague fear of seeing Walter Blake’s ghost as you pass the spot to-night?’

‘I have passed the spot any time for the last twenty years, and have seen no ghost.’

‘But this evening, when your mind is full of the poor man, might not imagination conjure up his image?’

‘I leave the enjoyment of a vivid imagination to your more impressionable sex, Mrs. Aspinall. Mine is not lively enough to shape poor Blake’s ghost out of the mists of evening.’

“‘Shadows to-night have struck more terror to the soul of Richard than can the substance of ten thousand soldiers,’” quoted Mrs. Aspinall laughingly. ‘Are you made of sterner stuff than crook-backed

Dick? But you have not his guilty conscience, and that makes all the difference. When are you going to bring Dulcie to dine with me?’

‘Whenever you like to ask us.’

‘But that is always. You have a standing invitation to drive over and dine at the Towers in a friendly, impromptu way, and you never come. You are asked to formal dinners, and you have always some excuse for refusing. You are a positive hermit!’

‘I own to a love of my own fireside, but I like pleasant society also. May I bring Dulcie to-morrow, if you are going to be at home?’

‘I shall be charmed.’

‘The usual quarter to eight, I suppose?’

‘Yes; good-night. I am so glad.’

They shook hands, and the brougham drove off, leaving Sir Everard standing in front of the assize court, the observed of the little crowd waiting to see the notabilities come out. He walked briskly off to the Peacock to get his horse, and found Morton Blake in the stable yard, on the same errand.

‘Well, Morton, are you satisfied now?’ he asked.



‘Yes, I suppose I am satisfied; and yet I have a curious feeling of incompleteness in the whole thing, as if there were something yet wanting—as if we had reached only a preliminary stage in the discovery of the truth. Can there be anything behind, do you think, Sir Everard? Had this man an accomplice? Was he the tool of a greater villain?’

‘My dear Morton, the whole story seems obvious and commonplace to the last degree—a starving wretch by the way-side—brutalized by ignorance and want—ready to commit any crime in order to prolong his worthless life.’

‘My mind has been troubled by the counsel’s suggestions of a deeper motive—a mystery underlying the apparently commonplace story.’

‘My dear fellow, the counsel was paid to talk. He had to set up some kind of defence, to suggest a doubt where there was no room for doubt. Having no case, and being a man of small experience, he indulged his oratorical powers at the expense of common sense. Shall we ride home together?’

‘If you please.’

Their horses had been brought out by this time.

They mounted, and rode under the old archway, beneath which so many a stage coach had rattled and rumbled in the days before railways. They rode slowly through the narrow town to the wide high-road, bordered on each side by grassy strips of waste land, from which Austhorpe Lane diverged.

They rode at a sharp trot after they left the town, and only pulled up their horses as they approached Blatchmardean Copse, near the scene of the murder.

‘My dear Morton, it grieves me to see you so depressed,’ said Sir Everard, as they walked gently past the little wood. ‘All has been done that can be done. Justice is satisfied. Why should the loss and sorrow of twenty years ago, the grief of your childhood, be suffered to cloud your manhood with gloom? It is hardly fair to my poor little Dulcie that you should so abandon your mind to one all-absorbing idea. She has had very little happiness from your society since her last sad birthday.’

‘Yes, I know I am wrong,’ answered the younger man. ‘I have brooded too much upon the past. But now, as you say, justice will be done. I ought to be satisfied. I fancy that no son, whose father—a loving

and beloved father—died as mine died, could ever completely put aside his grief for that loss. But I will not yield in an unmanly way to that morbid feeling. My father is avenged. That ought to be enough for me. I hope you understand that through all the trouble and excitement of the last six weeks my love for Dulcie has not been a jot the less real and true because I have kept myself aloof from her. I would not cloud her fair young life with my sorrow, and I could not take life lightly or pleasantly during that period of suspense. To-night I will put all trouble out of my mind, and will make myself happy in my darling's society.'

This was said with a manly frankness, of which Sir Everard could but approve. They had passed the scene of the murder while Morton was speaking, and his companion saw the young man's shrinking glance at the weedy ditch, the steep bank, and the pollard oak above it, whose bare branches stood sharply out against the gray evening sky, a perpetual sign to mark the fatal spot.

What a happy evening that was for gentle Dulcie. She was near the gate waiting for her father's coming,

as the two men rode into the avenue, a graceful little figure in a furred jacket, with the pale gold of her hair just visible under a coquettish little fur hat.

Morton alighted quickly, and was by her side before she had recovered from her surprise at seeing him.

‘I thought you were never coming here any more,’ she said, it being something less than a week since his last visit.

‘I did not care to come often while I had trouble on my mind, Dulcie. But now it is all over, I am your slave again.’

‘Is the poor man going to be hanged?’ asked Dulcie.

‘Yes.’

‘I am——’ she was going to say sorry, but checked herself, warned by Morton’s angry glance, and slipped her hand lightly under his arm as they walked side by side to the house. ‘I am glad your suspense and trouble are over,’ she concluded.

‘We have only half-an-hour to spend with you, Dulcie,’ said Sir Everard. ‘I have to dress for the sheriff’s dinner, and I dare say Morton is anxious to get home and tell his people the result of the trial.’

‘I am never anxious to leave Dulcie,’ answered Morton, “but I have no doubt my womenkind are impatient for tidings.’

‘I shall just have time to give you some tea,’ said Dulcie. ‘Poor things, how tired and worn out you must be! Did you get any luncheon?’

‘There was an interval for luncheon, but neither Morton nor I eat any.’

‘Then you shall have some sandwiches. Our cook has a particular talent for sandwiches. She is almost as good as a German. I suppose you know that the Germans have a hundred and fifty different kinds of sandwiches, Morton?’

‘I blush to say that I was unaware of their profound art in that line.’

‘Oh, they are a great people. The greatest Egyptologists, fiddle-players, and cooks in the world.’

‘Provided always that you like German cookery,’ said Morton.

Dulcie was in high spirits, delighted at getting her lover back again, forgetting for once in her life to be sorry for a woe that came within her ken. She gave Scroope her orders about the tea. It was to be some-

thing sumptuous in the way of afternoon teas. There were to be sandwiches, and cake, and some of those gigantic Australian grapes which were just now in their highest beauty.

There was a noble fire of logs in Dulcie's room, a blaze that lit up the pots and pans and dark oak walls, and Japanese cabinets, and high-art piano. The double octagon table was drawn near the hearth, the tea-tray was there already, an old silver circular tray, on a fringed crimson-and-white damask cloth. Everything that wasn't Japanese was early English, or at least as early as Queen Anne's time. Never did a room look prettier, or more comfortable on a cold winter evening.

Morton went to his favourite chair in the corner screened by the projecting chimney-piece, and seated himself with an air of unqualified enjoyment. He forgot everything except that he was with Dulcie.

Sir Everard sank into his deep arm-chair without a word. He left the young people to be happy after their own manner. But with Dulcie her father was always foremost.

‘How tired you look, dearest,’ she said, leaning over him and taking his hand, ‘and how feverish your hand is! Such a long day, and the ride home in the cold, have been too much for you.’

‘Yes, dear, I am rather tired. The atmosphere of the court was horrible, enough to cloud any man’s brain. No wonder there is a good deal of nonsense talked in law courts occasionally. The counsel are half asphyxiated. Don’t look so anxious, Dulcie. I am only tired. There is nothing else amiss with me.’

‘You had better not go to the dinner, father.’

‘My love, the dinner will do me good. I want the reaction of lively society after the gloom of to-day.’

‘Do you mean that the judge and the counsel will be lively, papa—the judge after having condemned a man to be hanged?’

‘Do you think they ought to be in mourning for him, Dulcie, or that the judge should wear the black cap at dinner?’

‘No, papa, but I cannot imagine any judge with proper feeling going into society and making merry after having doomed a man to death.’

‘Poor Dulcie. The judges are made of harder stuff than little girls like you. They go into society, and eat and drink, and talk wisely or wittily, as the case may be; and I believe the hanging judges are generally the greatest *bons-vivants*.’

Dulcie sighed, and began to pour out the tea. Morton, who in her smiles had forgotten all his troubles, did ample justice to the German sandwiches and hot-house grapes, and drank numerous cups of tea—or perhaps, as the pretty Japanese cups were very small and shallow, it may be said that he drank one dish of tea in several instalments. Sir Everard would eat nothing. He lay back in his chair, silent, prostrate, after the excitement of the day.



## CHAPTER X.

### A SUPERIOR WOMAN.

THE honourable Mrs. Aspinall was a lady who had made the journey of life with a fixed determination of always taking the lead of her fellow-travellers. She had occupied the box seat on the coach, as it were, and had required an extra amount of attention from coachman and guard. She had such a boundless faith in her own superiority that she had finally succeeded in making other people believe too. 'This man will do great things,' said Mirabeau of Robespierre, 'because he believes in himself.' Mrs. Aspinall's high estimation of her own merits had enabled her to reach the top of that particular tree on which she desired to perch; and, once having gained her place, she knew how to keep it.

She was not the wealthiest or the most aristocratic woman in the county. She was neither the handsomest nor the cleverest; but, by adopting a leading

tone, by talking of herself always as if she were first and foremost, by the calm arrogance with which she put down other people and asserted her own opinions, she had contrived to achieve social leadership. She had invested herself with the regal mantle and put on the crown, and nobody had the courage, or perhaps the inclination, to pluck them off. Of the lady's hereditary claim to distinction society knew very little. The honourable Thomas Aspinall, as a younger son of Lord Riverdale, was a sprig of nobility ; but his wife Sir Bernard Burke described briefly as Calphurnia, younger daughter of Patrick O'Ryan, Esq., Holly Hill, County Cork. This might mean anything or nothing, said society, slavishly submitting to pretensions for which it could discover no adequate basis. The honourable Thomas had gone to his place in the family vault fifteen years ago, and Mrs. Aspinall had enjoyed all the privileges of unfettered widowhood ever since. She had no children to occupy her time and make her acquainted with care, to sponge upon her limited income and remind people of her age by their ridiculously rapid growth. She was free to live her own life, and her life was essen-

tially selfish. She had not been unflattered by matrimonial offers during her long widowhood ; but among her various suitors there had been no one able to give her a better position than she enjoyed as a widow : and the deaf adder was never more indifferent to the voice of the charmer than was Mrs. Aspinall to the pleading of a lover who had no substantial advantages to sustain his suit.

Her income was not large, but it just sufficed, with careful management, for the lady's personal wants, and enabled her to head all those subscription lists which have a local importance, and are seen by everybody. She had the use for her life of Aspinall Towers, a roomy old house in a park of considerable extent, but sparsely timbered, the late Lord Riverdale having considerably denuded his various seats and manors of such useless excrescences as oaks, elms, and beeches. The house was big, and draughty, and cold. It had been last furnished early in the reign of George the Third, and the chairs and tables were all of that angular and spindle-legged character which is now accepted as your only beauty in cabinet-maker's work. Mrs. Aspinall declared that every-

thing had been made by the renowned Chippendale ; and she rejoiced inwardly at a revolution in taste which enabled her to be in the height of the fashion without putting her hand in her pocket to buy anything new. Even the faded colouring of her curtains and chair covers, a kind of pallid mouldiness which pervaded everything in the house, was artistic ; and Mrs. Aspinall had the satisfaction of saving money, while she sneered at the glowing crimsons and peacock greens to be found in the mansions of the newly rich.

On the morning after the trial Mrs. Aspinall began to busy herself at an early hour with her preparations for that friendly little dinner which Sir Everard Courtenay had promised to eat with her. Although essentially selfish and self-indulgent, she was not lazy. No idle person could have acquired the position she had taken upon herself, or maintained it upon her narrow means. She liked work. She had a tremendous stock of energy which had to be got rid of somehow. She found as much enjoyment in an active life, a perpetual moving to and fro—managing, calling, letter-writing—as women of

lymphatic temper find in lolling in a soft nest beside the fire, reading a novel.

To-day she had much to do in a few hours. She wanted this dinner of to-night to be as pleasant as it was possible for a dinner to be. She had been trying her hardest—and she was a woman of exceptional persistency—to get Sir Everard and his daughter to the Towers in a friendly, familiar way, and heretofore she had failed. Sir Everard had dined six years ago at one of her grand dinners. Dulcie had gone to one of her lawn parties, under Miss Blake's wing, and chiefly to please Morton ; but here it had ended. In vain had Mrs. Aspinall plied the baronet and his daughter with every variety of invitation. Sir Everard pleaded that he rarely went anywhere, and had lost all relish for society. Dulcie urged in excuse for frequent refusals that she did not care to go out without her father.

But now, in a yielding moment, Sir Everard had promised to come, and Calphurnia determined that having once given way he should give way again, until he became as wax in her hands.

‘A man like that would be worth listening to,’

the widow told herself, remembering those ineligible suitors whom she had dismissed so coolly.

‘I must have some one to meet them, Pawker,’ she said to a genteel drudge, who combined the offices of stillroom maid, needlewoman, and lady’s maid, under the ladylike appellation of companion. Just fourteen years ago this long-suffering Pawker, then hovering between girlhood and womanhood, and with a fresh-coloured, pleasing appearance, had advertized her willingness to be generally useful in the character of companion to a lady of position, and her further willingness to accept a small salary, her chief object being to secure a comfortable home. Miss Pawker was the eldest daughter of a struggling parson, and it had of late been made clear to her that her presence in the family circle was regarded rather as a burden than as a blessing.

Mrs. Aspinall answered the advertisement, and invited the young lady, whose paternal home was only ten miles on the other side of Blackford, to come to the Towers for a preliminary interview. There was not a word about railway expenses, but Miss Pawker was deeply moved by the address of Aspinall

Towers, and the gorgeous blending of gold and colour in the lady's monogram. Louisa's greatest weakness was a worship of rank and style—a craving for the society of fashionable people; and the name of Mrs. Aspinall was delightfully familiar to her in the local newspapers as one of the leaders of county fashion. She paid for her second-class return ticket willingly, though the purse from which the money came was but scantily furnished, and she made her difficult journey across country to Highclere, whence a fly, at the fearful expenditure of half-a-guinea, carried her to Aspinall Towers.

It was a bleak, blowy October day, and though Louisa was awed by the grim gray towers, with their narrow windows and machicolated parapets, flanking a long gray house, and by the extent of the park through which she approached this stony mansion, she could but feel that the place altogether looked shivery, and that for every-day comfort the cosy little village vicarage, with its holly-hedged garden and single paddock, was a better place to live in. But Louisa panted for style, and here was a style far beyond anything to which her aspiring

mind had soared. Those towers, this park, thrilled her. 'It is positively ducal!' she exclaimed to herself, enraptured at the thought that it might be her lot to inhabit that mediæval mansion.

A crimson footman handed her over to a butler in irreproachable black, and by that functionary she was conducted to Mrs. Aspinall's morning room—a spacious apartment with pale salmon-coloured walls, and a white-and-salmon cornice of elaborate design—a room which would have looked warmer and more comfortable with a little more furniture in it. The intensely Chippendale chairs and tables had a pinched and shrunken appearance on this chilly morning.

Mrs. Aspinall received the stranger with a kind of off-hand friendliness which struck Louisa as the essence of good breeding.

'Come and sit by the fire,' she said, 'and put your feet on the fender. You look blue with cold.'

Louisa had been taught to consider it a social crime to put her foot on a fender. The home fenders had been sacred. But at Mrs. Aspinall's request she timidly rested the sole of her stout country-made



boot on the edge of the brass fender, while that lady, seated opposite, perched her gold-rimmed binoculars on the bridge of her nose, and scrutinized Miss Pawker from head to foot.

‘Now, my dear, what can you do?’ asked Mrs. Apinall in a business-like tone, when she had finished her survey. ‘Are you accomplished—play, sing, speak French, Italian, German; paint flowers and landscapes——?’

‘Oh, dear, no, madam,’ exclaimed Louisa, reddening and looking frightened. ‘If I were able to do all that I should have gone out as a finishing governess, and should have hoped to earn a hundred guineas a year.’

‘I see. You have no accomplishments: and because you can do nothing you think yourself the proper person to go out as companion to a lady of position.’

Louisa’s blood seemed to freeze in her veins. Had she paid seven and elevenpence for her railway ticket, waited ever so long at those shelterless cross-country junctions, and finally expended ten shillings on a flyman who made it a favour to convey her to

her destination, in order to be lectured by the honourable Mrs. Aspinall, and sent home with a sense of her own incapacity.

‘I hope,’ she faltered, ‘that although I am not universally accomplished I have the power to make myself useful and agreeable in a lady’s household. My sisters and I were educated at home, and my father, a country vicar, could not afford us the advantage of governess or masters. We learnt all my mother could teach us. It is only lately that I have thought of taking a situation, but I certainly fancied myself qualified for the post I seek. I can play a little, sing a little, know a little French, am a good hand at all kinds of plain and fancy needlework.’

‘Can you turn a gown, and make a bonnet?’ asked Mrs. Aspinall.

‘I always make and remake my own gowns, and sometimes make my own bonnets.’

‘I’m glad of that. I might now and then want you to be useful in that way. I have my own maid, of course, but as she has to assist in the housework I may want a little extra help now and then. I couldn’t wear anything made by a country dress-

maker, and when I don't care to order a gown straight from Worth I like to get one thrown together at home.'

'I should be always delighted to be useful,' replied Miss Pawker, not foreseeing to what she was pledging herself.

'So you say in your advertisement; but it's just as well to have these matters clearly understood. Do you like reading aloud?'

'I am used to it.'

'That's better, as I shan't be afraid of tiring you when I want the *Times* and *Post* read to me of an evening. You are fond of flowers, I suppose?'

'Passionately.'

'Then it will be an amusement to keep my jardinières and window boxes in order, and to potter about with your garden scissors and the watering can in the conservatories.'

This sounded home-like and pleasant, almost like being treated as a daughter of the house.

'That kind of work would delight me,' said Miss Pawker.

'I thought so. And then I should want you to

give your attention to table decoration—the arrangement of a dessert, for instance. Butlers are so narrow-minded and clumsy. You and I could hit upon new ideas, and infuse a little poetry into the business.'

'I should be charmed to assist.'

'With regard to your meals,' pursued Mrs. Aspinall, now contemplating the vicar's daughter dreamily, as she lay back in her chair, 'I think it would be as well for you to dine when I take my luncheon, and take your tea and supper in a snug little sitting-room of your own, which I should contrive to spare you, as I know you would appreciate the privilege of a private sitting-room. This would leave the evening free to both of us. If I wanted you to come and read or play to me, or chat with me, you could come. If I didn't, you could amuse yourself in your own way—write letters, or novels—most young ladies write novels, and it must be very amusing for them, and not too expensive, now the duty is taken off paper, so long as they don't publish them.'

All this was said with an agreeable familiarity that enchanted Miss Pawker.

‘And now there is the question of salary. If I were inclined to make bargains I should say that a young lady who is absolutely inexperienced ought not to expect any salary for the first two or three years of her engagement; but as I like to be good-natured to young people, I’ll waive the question of inexperience, and you shall start with a small salary. Now, what is your idea of a small salary?’

‘I have thought that thirty pounds a year—’ faltered Louisa.

‘Thirty pounds!’ screamed Mrs. Aspinall. ‘My poor child, are you aware that in Great Britain and Ireland alone there are ever so many million surplus women? Do you know that feminine labour is a drug in the market; that if I were to advertise for a companion I should be inundated with applications from young ladies wanting to come to me for nothing? Pray, my dear, be reasonable! Twenty pounds a year, with the moderate use of my laundry, no frilled petticoats or white muslin gowns, is the very utmost I could afford to give you.’

Louisa hesitated, and looked dubiously round at the Chippendale furniture, the hot-house flowers in

old Satsuma jars, the black-and-gold Japanese screen, the salmon-coloured walls. It was all very elegant, refined, aristocratic; but twenty pounds a year was a poor pittance; and that restriction about frilled petticoats and muslin gowns was galling. Then she comforted herself with the thought that she had only one frilled petticoat in her wardrobe; and then she reflected how nice it would be to live with such a friendly, easy-tempered person as Mrs. Aspinall, and to see those machicolated battlements every time she looked out of the window, and to walk in that extensive park. She felt that it would be something to pass all at once into an aristocratic atmosphere, to be waited upon by a footman in crimson plush, instead of the red-elbowed housemaid at home.

‘Well, my dear,’ said Mrs. Aspinall, breaking sharply on the girl’s reverie, ‘will it do for you?’

‘Yes, if you please, madam. I think, if you feel that I can please you, I should like to come.’

‘Of course you can please me. That is a matter within your own volition. If you are accommodating and industrious—a very early riser, by-the-

bye, that is indispensable—and sweet-tempered, and quiet in all your ways, I am sure we shall get on. You may come to me early next week. I know all about your people, so there need be no worry about references. And now you shall have some tea and bread and butter before you go back to the station.’

So Louisa sat with her feet on the fender, and was regaled with strong tea and delicious home-made bread and butter, and unconsciously sold herself into bondage. She had now been with Mrs. Aspinall fourteen years; and yet she was not altogether unhappy. Mrs. Aspinall, though freely spoken of in the servants’ hall as a Tartar, had never been positively unkind to Louisa Pawker. There was no motive for unkindness where the slave was so willing or so submissive.

## CHAPTER XI.

### A FRIENDLY DINNER.

‘WE must have some one to meet them,’ repeated Mrs. Aspinall. ‘Morton Blake must come, of course, as he is engaged to Miss Courtenay. Write him a little note, Pawker, like a good soul, and say that he is to be here at a quarter to eight to meet his sweetheart, while I write to Lady Frances Grange. You’d better ring the bell first, or run down to the hall—that will be quicker—and tell John to order the groom to get ready to carry some letters immediately.’

Miss Pawker ran to execute this errand. She was always running up and downstairs to save the servants time or trouble, and was as lean and active as a middle-aged Mercury.

‘Dearest Fan,’ wrote Mrs. Aspinall, who had long ago assumed an affectionate authority over Lord Blatchmardean’s motherless daughter, as if she had



been a godmother, or as if the girl had been committed to her care by a dying mother. 'I want you and your brother to come and make yourselves eminently agreeable this evening. Sir Everard Courtenay and his daughter—and I hope his daughter's lover—are to dine here *en famille*. Come, dear, and look your brightest and prettiest, and sing your delicious French ballads, and be the life of the evening. I know there is a meet on to-day, and I daresay you and Lord Beville will be over half the county between this and dusk, but I will take no excuse for your non-appearance here at a quarter to eight.'

The groom went off with the letters on one of Mrs Aspinall's gray cobs, and the lady and her companion began their preparations for the evening. Mrs. Aspinall was an early bird, and had despatched her invitations before nine o'clock, knowing that Lady Frances and her brother would leave Blatchmardean before ten.

'Now, Pawker, my dear, you must exercise all your taste, and make my rooms lovely,' said the lady. 'The dinner table must be artistic and novel. Let there be a lowish mass of scarlet geraniums and

white chrysanthemums in the middle, and a feathery fringe of ferns for a border. Then we will use the old Charles the Second engraved glass, which Mr. Aspinall's mother left me. Poor dear soul, it wasn't much, but it was kindly meant. The old Leeds dessert set will do. It has a homely look, yet is exquisitely artistic. Run down, and set about your preparations, my dear, and send me up Jolfish.'

Jolfish was cook and housekeeper, so-called for dignity, since Mrs. Aspinall was far too keen a manager to let her housekeeping be done by any one but herself. Jolfish was obese and slow, but a good cook, and passing honest. She had never wronged her mistress by so much as a basin of dripping, and it was well for Jolfish that she had not.

'Now, my dear Jolfish,' said Mrs. Aspinall, ever so sweetly, for the cook had her little tempers, and did not like dinner parties that came upon her unawares, or 'unbeknownst,' as she called it. 'I want you to send me up the prettiest little dinner you ever served in your life.'

When might it be, mum? Next week?'

'No, Jolfish, this evening.'

‘Lor, mum, what can I do for this evening? You ain’t got no company this evening, have you, mum? I’d got my dinner all laid out in my mind. A filleted sole, and a dish of cutlets, with shampinions, and one of them grouse Lord Blatchmardean sent you.’

‘That would have done charmingly, Jolfish, if I had been alone. But I want a nice little dinner for six.’

And then Mrs. Aspinall, who was a genius at the composition of a bill of fare, lightly sketched the ground-plan of a little dinner which would have satisfied the ideas of a club-house *chef*, or a professional diner-out. Jolfish was as objective as she dared be; prophesied that there wouldn’t be such a thing as turbot to be heard of at Highclere; that the price of fowls would be ruinous; or that the birds would be old and tough; that it was a fortnight too early for a turkey poult, and ridiculous to expect oysters. Her mistress over-ruled every objection, and dismissed Jolfish with a smile.

‘I shall want a deal of wine for all them gravies and the soup,’ said Mrs. Jolfish, lingering on the threshold.

‘Browse shall give you a bottle of sherry, and a tumbler of port, and be sure your clear soup tastes of something more than wine and water.’

The cook hoped she had made clear soup before in her life, but as she expressed that aspiration in a murmur, Mrs. Aspinall affected not to hear it.

Browse appeared an hour later, bearing two notes on a parcel-gilt salver. One from Morton Blake, ‘delighted,’ &c., the other from Lady Frances.

‘Yes, you most indefatigable woman, we’ll come, since you make a point of it. But don’t be angry if we both begin to look sleepy before the evening is half over, for we expect a big day with the South Daleshire.

Yours always,

‘F. G.’

Mrs. Aspinall spent her morning cosily by the fire in her salmon-coloured sitting-room, writing letters, regulating her accounts, and reading the last fashionable autobiography. She was a woman who diligently improved her mind with new books. She read memoirs, travels, reviews, political essays on occasion, and even a little science. Her opinions and ideas were as new and fashionable as her gowns

and bonnets, and she passed for a woman of some culture. But if you had asked her about De Quincey or Lamb, La Bruyère, Pascal, Montaigne, she would have rewarded you with a blank stare. She thought Byron an ephemeral versifier who had achieved a brief notoriety by the audacity of his opinions and the looseness of his morals.

Miss Pawker appeared at luncheon after a morning's elegant drudgery. She had decorated drawing-room, ante-room, and dinner table with every available flower, and had vanquished the surly old head gardener in more than one battle. She had washed the Charles the Second glass, and the Leeds dessert dishes, both too sacred to be trusted to meaner hands. She had given out table linen, and preserved fruits, and Parisian sweetmeats. She had brought forth crewel-work cushions, and antimacassars, which were too fresh and elegant for daily wear. And now she sat down to the luncheon, which was always her dinner, looking wan and tired, and inwardly wishing she were in the humblest lodging of her own, rather than amidst the splendours of Aspinall Towers.

‘I should ask you to dine with us this evening,

my dear,' said Mrs. Aspinall amiably, 'only we shall be six, and that is such a nice number for the oval table in the dining-room. If the table were only round the odd number would make no difference.'

'Dear Mrs. Aspinall, it doesn't matter,' Louisa answered with a feeble smile, although she would have liked to dine with Lady Frances Grange, for that young lady had been cordial and pleasant to her on the rare occasions when they had met. But she was too familiar with what she called 'Mrs. Aspinall's ways' not to know that this talk about the table was only an excuse. If there had been five she would not have been asked to be the sixth. If there had been nine she would not have been wanted to be the tenth. Her only chance of a place at the banquet was when a party of fifteen or sixteen had unluckily dwindled to thirteen, and then Mrs. Aspinall insisted on having Pawker, lest any superstitious guest should feel uncomfortable.

'You must come and take your tea with us, of course,' said her patroness.

'I shall be very pleased. Lady Frances is so pretty.'

‘Pretty! An olive-skinned thing, and as thin as a whipping post. Dulcibella Courtenay is pretty, if you like. That is real beauty.’

‘Lady Frances has such a distinguished air.’

‘Naturally. Blue blood will show itself somehow,’ answered Mrs. Aspinall, in a tone which implied that her blood was of the deepest indigo.

She spent the afternoon in making a round of visits. Royalty of her kind required to be maintained by frequent progresses among her people. She never suffered herself to be forgotten. She was indefatigable in making calls, and she had a bi-monthly afternoon, the first and third Saturday in the month, to which she insisted upon people coming. There were only tea and cakes and gossip, and occasionally a little feeble music, but Mrs. Aspinall’s pale amber settees were generally crowded.

At half-past seven Mrs. Aspinall was in her drawing-room, looking her handsomest. She was a fine-looking woman, of what is generally considered the aristocratic type, nose arched and knobby, nostrils large, eyes a cold gray, eyebrows a work of

art; hair the Titian red, fluffy in texture, covering her high, narrow forehead with stray locks and tendrils which effectually veiled the wrinkles of seven and forty; teeth good and real; lips thin and a trifle acid in expression, but of a vivid rose which would have been exceptional in a girl of seventeen, and was startling in a waning beauty.

To-night Mrs. Aspinall wore a myrtle green velvet gown, with no adornment save drooping ruffles of old Mechlin lace, and an antique Venetian chate-laine of dull gold.

She walked slowly up and down the long drawing-room, musing upon her expected guests—or rather upon one of them, for it was of one only whom she thought.

‘Why should he not marry?’ she asked herself. ‘His daughter will be married before long, and then he will find that house of his horribly dull. He will either marry, or go off to the Continent and wander half over Europe, as he did after his wife’s death. It would be far more sensible to marry—if he made a wise choice—and I think he is too clever a man to choose some frivolous girl, who would think she did



him a favour by accepting him, and would compensate herself by making his life miserable.'

The drawing-room at Aspinall Manor was spacious and lofty; but it had none of that cheery homeliness which made the Tangley Manor drawing-room so pleasant. It was a pallid, cold-looking apartment, the walls white and gold, with large oval mirrors at intervals, and old crystal girandoles. The draperies and chair and sofa coverings were of amber satin, which time had robbed of its original brightness and warmth of tone. The Aubusson carpet was of faded drab, and blue, and cream, and gold, all blending into one pale, subdued tint. The long, straight windows, with their long, straight curtains, accentuated the loftiness of the room. There were broad amber settees against the walls, spindle-legged chairs of the genuine Louis Seize period, in gold and amber, two or three spindle-legged tables, round and oval, decorated with masks, goats' heads and festoons, a pair of buhl jardinières filled with ferns and flowers, and all the rest of the room was empty space. It was a room especially adapted for stately receptions and large assemblies, and it was well for

Mrs. Aspinall that she had a snug and cosy retreat from all this barren grandeur in the small ante-room through which her saloon was approached. Here, within walls whose tawny leather covering gave a look of warmth, there were low modern chairs of the puff species, gipsy tables, books, newspapers, and all the comforts of every-day life.

‘Sir Everard Courtenay, Miss Courtenay, Mr. Blake,’ announced Browse, the butler.

Mrs. Aspinall received Sir Everard and his daughter with enthusiasm—it was so good, so kind, so nice of Dulcie and her father to come in this truly friendly way. To Morton she gave two fingers and a smiling nod. He was nothing to her. She had no daughters to marry, and a rich young *parvenu* more or less in the world could make no difference to her. But she had her views about Sir Everard—had cherished those views for a long time, and had striven in vain for the opportunity of carrying them to a successful issue. Now that Dulcie was going to be married it seemed to her that the opportunity had come.

She was glad when, after a little trivial talk

about the weather, Dulcie and Morton strayed through the curtained archway into the ante-room, with that curious knack of getting away from other people peculiar to engaged lovers.

Mrs. Aspinall and Sir Everard were in front of the fireplace, she standing in her favourite attitude, with her foot on the low, brass fender, and the edge of her velvet gown drawn up a little, to show the rich lace upon her petticoat. She had a long, narrow foot and high instep — unmistakable mark of that blue blood on which she prided herself.

‘When is it to be, Sir Everard?’ she asked, looking down at her green satin slipper.

‘When is what to be?’

‘Dulcie’s marriage.’

Sir Everard gave a little start, as if it were a most unexpected question.

‘Her marriage! Not for a long time, I hope. She and Morton are engaged, but there has been no talk of fixing the time for their wedding. She is so young.’

‘Twenty,’ said Mrs. Aspinall, with an insinuating air. ‘I was married at seventeen.’

She emphasized this with a sigh, as if that early

marriage had not been altogether happy, as if there were still an empty chamber in her heart waiting for an eligible tenant.

‘A great deal too soon,’ said Sir Everard, with a provokingly matter-of-fact tone.

‘It was my father’s doing. I had no voice in the matter.’

‘I hope Dulcie will be in no hurry,’ said Sir Everard, not showing the faintest retrospective interest in Mrs. Aspinall’s marriage. ‘I shall be wretched without her.’

‘You will miss her very much, no doubt, but it is a loss you must have anticipated. And, altogether charming as she is, at her age Dulcie can be no companion for you.’

‘Not a companion for me,’ cried Sir Everard. ‘She is my second self—my source of perpetual delight. She understands my every thought and feeling; she appreciates my favourite books as thoroughly as the subtlest of professional critics could do; she cheers me when I am dull; she soothes me when I am weary. Where should I find such another companion? No, Mrs. Aspinall, I am too old to make new friend-

ships. When Dulcie leaves me my life will be desolate.'

Mrs. Aspinall's thin lips tightened a little, and her calculating gray eyes assumed a troubled look, but only for a few moments, and then she was able to smile her sweetest smile at the affectionate father.

'Nothing in nature can be more beautiful than such an attachment,' she said. 'But for your own sake, dear Sir Everard, I trust that new friendships—new ties—'

'There can be none. New ties—impossible. I have but a remnant of life to live, and that must be spent with no better companions than my books.'

'A remnant of life ; you are so young.'

'Fifty next January, Mrs. Aspinall ; and I feel as if I had lived a century. But I did not come here to be gloomy. Dulcie and I will not be entirely parted, even when she is Mrs. Blake. I shall see her often, and in years to come her children will console me for the loss of their mother. I must submit to the common fate.'

'Lord Beville, Lady Frances Grange,' announced Browse.

Their entrance made an agreeable diversion. Lady Frances, called by her intimates Lady Fanny, and even Fan, was one of the liveliest young women in the county ; a magnificent horsewoman, a charming singer, and with about as much education, outside those two accomplishments, as the average ballet-girl. She, like Dulcie, was motherless, and had been allowed to have her own way ever since she could remember, and had governed her good old governess, and reigned supreme in a slip-shod household. But she had not made such good use of her liberty as Dulcie had done. She was not given to books, save of the lightest and most amusing order. She had just learnt enough English to write a decent letter, and enough French to sing a ballad in that language, and to understand and pronounce those phrases which crop up in British conversation. Beyond this, her governess had been a failure.

But despite these shortcomings, Frances Grange was so winning and so sweet, that no one would have wished her other than she was. She was just pretty enough to be intensely fascinating. She had small, delicately-cut features, a brunette complexion,

dark brown hair, worn short and curly like a boy's, so that there were no plaits or tails to tumble over her shoulders or be blown across her eyes in the hunting field. She had a slim and graceful figure, and, though tall among women, was a feather-weight on a powerful hunter. She dressed simply and well, without extravagance, talked as much slang as an Oxford undergraduate, and set the strict middle-aged section of society at defiance. Her chief friend was her brother, who resembled her mentally and morally, but not physically, since he was a tawny-whiskered young athlete, of the true Saxon type, broad-nosed, blue-eyed, ruddy-cheeked. He adored Fanny ; Fanny believed in him ; and they were altogether a model brother and sister.

The evening was as pleasant as Mrs. Aspinall could have desired. Yet things did not take the exact turn she had intended. Lady Frances contrived to absorb a good deal of Sir Everard's attention, with her lively sallies and rattling description of the day's sport ; Dulcie and Morton were happy in their quiet way, sitting together in corners, but were intruded upon more than they cared about by Lord

Beville, who insisted upon talking to Dulcie, and was inclined to ignore Mr. Blake's peculiar privileges as an accepted suitor. Mrs. Aspinall felt when all was over that her evening had been a success ; but she made up her mind never again to invite Lady Frances to meet Sir Everard Courtenay.



## CHAPTER XII.

### AT THE SUGAR-LOAVES.

THE fields and hedgerows round Austhorpe were white with wintry rime, and all the trees were fairy-trees wreathed with hoar-frost. In pleasant contrast to this all-pervading whiteness, the lighted casements of cottages and homesteads shone out cheerily with ruddy fire-glow or yellow candle-light, brightening the arctic landscape, and comforting the wayfarer with the assurance of home and shelter near. The old ugly church, with its bare brick tower and blank rayless windows, alone looked bleak and grim. Everywhere else there was a twinkle of light, the gleam of a fire, blue smoke curling up through the clear night sky, the sense of a homely inhabited world. The brightest spot in the village, the very focus of comfort, and good cheer, and homeliness, and pleasant society, was the Three Sugar-Loaves Inn, a long, low, substantial building, standing bravely out

where two roads went off at right angles from the end of the broad village street. The proprietor of the Sugar-Loaves farmed a few acres of fertile pasture, speculated in his small way in store cattle, was an amateur of pigs, fattened turkeys for the Christmas market, and sold butter all the year round; hence had arisen a spaciousness and air of plenty about the inn and its surroundings which the mere traffic in neat wines, beer, and spirits could scarcely have produced. The very look of the house inside and out, the warm, cosy rooms and sanded passages, the glowing kitchen and cool dairy, the barns, poultry houses, and pig-sties adjacent, suggested good cheer, and an almost Gargantuan plenty.

Behind the bar was the parlour, a low room with a heavily-timbered ceiling, a wide fire-place, deeply recessed casement-windows looking into a garden where flowers and vegetables grew in homely propinquity, parsley and pinks, kail and cabbage roses, stocks and radishes jostling one another, in box-edged beds, screened and intersected by espaliers which were supposed to grow the biggest codling apples in the county.

To-night the closely-drawn red moreen curtains shut out the view of the whitened beds, where only an occasional kail sprout perked its green crest above the rimy ground. All within was comfort and warmth—shining brown walls, and shining brown chairs and tables reflecting the crimson gleam of the fire, and the yellow flame of the tall candles in old brass candle-sticks. Gas had never invaded Austhorpe, and the landlord of the Sugar-Loaves set his face against paraffin and the whole family of oils. Candles were one of the outward and visible signs of those good old Tory principles which John Rhind of the Sugar-Loaves had inherited from his father and grandfather, together with the brass candlesticks and the freehold of the inn; and he meant to burn candles to his dying day.

John Rhind, as the possessor of his homestead and farm, looked upon himself as one of the landowners of the place. He was inwardly pleased when working men or small boys addressed him as squire. He felt himself a bulwark of Church and State, he patronized Mr. Mawk, the curate, and he looked down upon the schoolmaster. His wife was the best-

dressed woman in Austhorpe, after Miss Courtenay and his daughter played the piano and worked in crewels all day long, like the finest lady in the land.

This parlour at the 'Three Sugar-Loaves' was the village club, and the chosen resort of all the best people in the parish of Austhorpe, and even some other parishes conterminous therewith; for there was no other inn within ten miles which afforded such solid comforts or enjoyed so wide a popularity. Here on this December night were assembled Shafto Jebb, the village doctor; Mr. Gomersall, farmer and churchwarden, of Pear Tree Farm, a cosy old homestead, a mile and a half from Austhorpe; Mr. Upham, better known as Jack Upham, the solicitor, who had his office at Highclere, but who lived in a rustic bow-windowed cottage in Austhorpe Lane; and lastly William Wadd, Morton Blake's bailiff, gamekeeper, and *factotum*.

The trial of Humphrey Vargas was but a week old, and it was still the staple of conversation at the 'Three Sugar-Loaves.' It had been discussed in all its bearings, yet no one had wearied of the subject. There was a strong human interest in it which made the theme agreeable to every mind. There was a

difference of opinion, too, among the nightly guests of the parlour, which heightened the interest.

There was a door of communication between the parlour and the bar, a door which was generally left open or ajar, for the convenience of prompt attendance on the part of the landlord, who waited in person on his parlour customers, deeming those convivial gentlemen the main-stay of his trade, and who very often joined in the conviviality, while his wife, a plump, comely personage, plied her needle by the neat little fireplace in the bar, and was pleased to hear her husband get the best of an argument, or put down a political opponent with the high-handed authority of a fine old pig-headed Conservatism.

To-night, just as conversation in the parlour was loudest, Morton Blake, who but rarely was known to cross the threshold of the 'Sugar-Loaves,' opened the front door, and came to the little half-door of the bar.

'Why, Mr.——' began John Rhind, surprised at the apparition, but Morton put his finger on his lips. He pointed significantly to the half-open door of communication, whereupon the landlord quietly closed it.

‘May I come in, and sit in your bar for a little while, Rhind?’ said Morton.

‘Why, of course you can, sir; and welcome you are, too. Your father was never the stranger here that you are. Many a time has he sat in that chair, while he had his hunter’s mouth washed out, after a hard day, and has taken his glass of beer as friendly as if he’d been one of the smock-frock farmers hereabouts. Not a bit of pride, sir—the genuine metal—and as fine a looking gentleman as ever wore shoe-leather.’

‘I’m glad you liked him, Rhind. I’m always glad to hear him praised.’

‘You’ve never heard anybody speak against him, I’ll warrant.’

‘No, thank God. He seems never to have made an enemy, in spite of that fellow’s insinuations,’ pursued Morton thoughtfully, and with a darkening brow.

‘Meaning the prisoner’s counsel, sir. Lord, don’t you take no heed of what he said. They must insinooate some’at. They’re paid to do it.’

I don’t want any one to know I’m here, Rhind.’

All right, sir. I can keep that there door fast, and you can sit there snug till we shuts up, if you like.'

'But I want the door a little way open. I hear from Wadd that there's been a good deal of talk about the trial, and I want to hear what people say about it. They wouldn't talk freely before me, you see, and I can't trust to Wadd's report of their conversation. He muddles everything so. I want to hear with my own ears.'

'That's easy enough, sir,' answered Rhind. 'They was all full of it five minutes ago, when I took in fresh glasses. I'll just set the door ajar, and you may hear every syllable, and none o' them chaps need be any the wiser.'

'Guilty,' replied Jack Upham, pursuing the argument of the evening, after a replenishing of glasses all round, and a general filling of pipes. The farmer and the bailiff smoked clay churchwardens, the doctor carried a short, black-muzzled meerschaum in the breast pocket of his cut-away coat, the lawyer alone indulged in cigars. 'Guilty,' repeated Mr. Upham, glaring defiance at Shafto Jebb. 'Why, of

course the fellow is guilty. Would any man put himself in such a fix who wasn't? A man doesn't put his neck into a noose without reason.'

'Did you never hear of a man losing temper with fortune and hanging himself because life didn't sit easy upon him?' argued the surgeon. 'Did you never hear of suicides? I thought they were common enough. You can hardly take up a newspaper without reading of three or four cases which would have been called *felo de se* fifty years ago. Now-a-days we're more charitable, and call them temporary insanity. Now what I say is that this Vargas gave himself up in a fit of temporary insanity. A poor wretch like that, with a heart no bigger than a shrimp's, hasn't pluck enough to go and buy three penn'orth of rope and put it round his own neck. He'd rather give himself up to a policeman, and get the job done for him. It isn't the first time a man has confessed to a crime he never committed, and I don't suppose it'll be the last; but as sure as I am sitting here in this arm-chair, smoking this pipe, it wasn't Humphrey Vargas who murdered Walter Blake.'



The listener, sitting between the half-open door and the snug little fireplace in the bar, waited with contracted brows and set lips for what was coming next.

‘But look here now, Shafto,’ remonstrated Joe Gomersall, the churchwarden, who was one of Mr. Jebb’s best customers, and therefore had ‘a claim to speak with authority. ‘There’s no use in launching out with such statements unless you are prepared to tell us what grounds you go upon.’

‘That’s easily done. First and foremost, the confession made by Humphrey Vargas is a cock-and-bull story. Any fool can see that. If I’d had to defend him I should have made a much stronger point of that than his counsel did.’

‘If he’d had Jebb for his counsel of course he’d have got off,’ said Upham, with a sneer.

Shafto Jebb was one of those clever men whose self-conscious cleverness offends more than their good-nature pleases.

‘Secondly,’ continued Jebb, ignoring the interruption,—‘and this the prisoner’s counsel ought to have found out, for it was known to the police at the

time—the man who killed Walter Blake was on horseback.’

‘How do you know that?’ asked Gomersall.

‘By the evidence of the hoof-prints on the road and bank. There was a frost the night after the murder—a light frost—but enough to harden every footmark on the road. I was out with the constable and another man next morning, examining the scene of the murder. Well, gentlemen, Mr. Blake’s horse had gone home, there was no doubt as to him. He’d rushed off like a mad thing in his fright, and made a dash right across Blatchmardean Copse; there were the traces of his flight through the brushwood and across the stream, and a bit of his bridle hanging on a low branch, plenty to show the way he took, and that he didn’t lose much time about it was proved at the inquest, for a boy found him feeding on Tangley Common at half-past six, ever so long before anybody knew about the murder. But just where Blake was found there were traces of another horse’s hoofs, as if one horseman had followed the other. Both stopped at the same point; there was nothing to show that the second horseman had gone on to Austhorpe; but

on the clay bank, within a few yards of the spot where the murdered man was found, there were traces to show that a horse had been jumped from the road to the bank, and across the hedge into the meadow beyond. It was a blind hedge, with a good deal of greenery about it, and the horse had gone crashing through a thick growth of blackberry bushes and oak saplings. In the field we lost all trace of him, for there were a couple of mares and foals grazing, and the marks on the grass were not distinct enough to show where the print had been made by an iron shoe, or where by the unshod hoof. There was a gate leading out of the field into an accommodation road, the kind of lane that an Irishman calls a boreen, but here the mud was so thick and the ground so broken we could trace nothing. How the horseman doubled and wound, or where he went, I can't say ; but it's perfectly clear to me, and it was clear at the time to old Tom Purdy, the constable—but I suppose he's in his dotage now and has forgotten all about it—that there was a horseman with Walter Blake when he was murdered.'

The company were evidently impressed. Mr

Jebb had said a good deal upon previous evenings, but he had never stated his case plainly until now.

‘Why didn’t you come forward and state this at the trial?’ asked Upham.

Shafto Jebb shrugged his shoulders.

‘The man had counsel to defend him,’ he said. ‘I supposed that his counsel would have heard all that I could tell him?’

‘You ought to make it known even now,’ said Gomersall.

‘I have thought of penning a letter to the *Times*,’ replied Jebb, ‘but I think it’s hardly worth while. I have signed a memorial to the Home Secretary, and I don’t think the poor devil will be hanged.’

Morton Blake started at this, and half rose from his seat.

‘Oh, there’s a memorial, is there?’ inquired the farmer.

‘Yes, the big-wigs have started it; Sir Nathaniel Ritherdon, Lord Blatchmardean, and Sir Everard Courtenay, and the rest of them. There’ll be a commutation of the sentence, depend upon it—penal servitude for life—and as the fellow no doubt

appropriated the dead man's watch and purse, he will get no more than he deserves if he finishes his career at Portland.'

'I don't think Mr. Tomplin would have made much out of your hoof-prints, Jebb, if he had been ever so well posted,' said Upham, the attorney, with a critical air. 'On a day when thirty or forty men were out hunting, a jump more or less would count for very little.'

'But the hounds didn't run that way.'

'No, but some fellow trying a short cut, you know——'

'Nonsense, man, the hunt was never within three miles of the spot. It wasn't the jump that was extraordinary, but the fact that the two horsemen rode to that spot together, that Blake was murdered on that spot, and that the second horseman, whoever he was, rode off across country from that spot.'

'How can any one tell that the two horsemen were together?' persisted the lawyer. 'The footprints may have been made at separate times, and the fact of the horseman jumping the bank at that point

may have been a simple coincidence; some farmer making a short cut home after the hunt.'

'I asked all the fellows who live out that way, and could hear of no one who had ridden across that field,' answered Jebb.

Jack Upham made very light of Mr. Jebb's piece of evidence. The two men always disagreed with each other upon principle. Each had a great idea of his own cleverness, and each thought the other wanted putting down. They were both members of Austhorpe Vestry, a narrow-minded village oligarchy, which believed itself to hold as distinct a place in history as the Council of Ten.

'And that's your only ground for believing Vargas innocent,' said Upham sneeringly.

'I don't say it's my only reason. It's one of my reasons.'

'Let us hear a few of the others.'

'Not to-night. I've no brief to defend Mr. Vargas, and I don't feel myself called upon to make any further statement of my reasons for believing him innocent. If a man of that stamp chooses to put a rope round his neck it isn't my business to take it off.'

‘I vote we change the conversation,’ suggested Gomersall, who foresaw the danger of a wordy war between the lawyer and the doctor. ‘We’ve talked a precious deal too much about this Vargas. He’s not an interesting character, and he isn’t worth it. How are you off for pheasants this year, Wadd?’ demanded the farmer, turning to Mr. Blake’s *factotum*, a stolid personage who enjoyed society, but rarely spoke unless he was spoken to.

‘Pretty well, thank you, furmer, but we should be just as well off if we hadn’t any, except for Mrs. Cook. Mr. Blake don’t take the interest in the covers as his father did. He don’t care about breedin’, and he ain’t hot upon shootin’. He just takes up his gun in what I call a namatoorist sort of a way—dilly-taunty-like—and he’s a fairish shot, I allow, but with none of the sperrit as his father had when he got in a warm corner, pepperin’ away at the burds like mad. And he don’t have the right sort of people at his place, neither,—none o’ them wild blades that used to keep us all on the move and never went to bed at night till it was time to get up in the mornin’.’

‘Times have changed, Wadd,’ said the lawyer.

‘So they have, Mr. Upham, but they ain’t changed for the better. Harvests is bad, and beasts is dear, and a good bit of horse-flesh ain’t to be had ; and this here country is criss-crossed with railways to that degree that you can’t go for a quiet ride without finding your horses shying away from a locomotive, or start a fox so that you mayn’t have to chop him up in a tunnel. There’s no improvement in anything except guns, and I like the old-fashioned sort best.’

‘Well, gentlemen, the best of friends must part,’ said Jebb, as he refilled his pipe for the homeward walk. ‘My missus will be wanting her bit of supper, and she never sits down till I get home. Are you ready, Joe ? We may as well walk together.’

Mr. Gomersall rose at his friend’s bidding, and this was the signal for a general break-up. The dark-faced, dark-whiskered Upham, renowned for his cleverness as a lawyer, but rather respected than liked, departed alone. Wadd rolled off towards Tangley, whistling as he went ; while Gomersall and the doctor strode along the broad highway, with its



frozen pond, and darkened schoolhouse, and low roofed cottages wrapped in night and silence.

Well, sir, you heerd 'em plain enough, didn't you?' asked the landlord cheerily, when the guests had made their departure, with loud leave-takings.

'Yes, I heard them.'

'But there ain't much in it when all's heerd, be there, Mr. Blake? A power o' talk, but it don't come to a pint.'

'I've heard enough to make me feel uncomfortable,' said Morton.

'Lord, now, Mr. Blake, don't say that. You didn't ought to give heed to a long-tongued fellow like Jebb, a man that must be talking. What business had he prying and spying about with the constable on the morning arter the murder? It weren't a medical case—it weren't his trade—but there's never a pie baked in Austhorpe that he mustn't have a finger in it. Don't you worry your mind, sir. The case is as plain as the nose on your face. The man who gave hisself up for the murder is the man who did it, and anybody that says he ain't must be a rank fool.'

Morton did not stop to argue the point. He took up his hat, thanked the landlord for his civility, wished Mr. Rhind good-night, and went away without another word.

‘A fine, handsome-looking young man, and civil spoken,’ said John Rhind, ‘but not a patch upon his father.’

## CHAPTER XIII

### A PLEA FOR THE PRISONER.

MORTON BLAKE sat alone in his study on the day after his evening visit to the Three Sugar-Loaves, trying to bring his mind to bear upon the pages of a Parliamentary report, but finding his thoughts inclined to wander to last night's conversation in the inn parlour, and to vain speculations upon what he had heard. Wadd, the bailiff, had been right in his assertion that Morton was altogether different from his father. Walter Blake had been of an easier temper, pleasure-loving, fond of society, an ardent sportsman, with no aspiration beyond the enjoyment of the present hour; a man of warm feelings, quick impulses, winning manners; a man who could make himself popular in every society, and who had been admired and beloved in his own particular set. Beyond pleasing himself and giving such pleasure as he could to other people, without

over-much trouble to himself, by open-handed, careless benevolence, and a sympathetic nature, Morton's father had never aspired. He had taken life and all its responsibilities lightly, and had considered this world a place in which his chief mission was to be happy. Before he was twenty-one he had plighted himself, in his usual impulsive manner, to Horatia Martin, the handsomest girl in the district, and before he was twenty-two, and had been six months married, he found that he had made one of those mistakes which with some men give an uncomfortable twist to a whole life-time. But Walter Blake, having found out his mistake, made the best of it. He was an admirable husband, but he was very seldom at home between breakfast and dinner. During dinner he made pretty speeches to his wife, who looked superb in evening dress, and did the honours of his house admirably. After dinner the master of the house was generally to be found with his masculine guests in the billiard-room and the smoking-room. It will be seen, therefore, that Mrs. Blake did not get much of her husband's society.

Bondage thus lightly worn hardly galled even

Walter Blake's self-indulgent nature, and not even his most intimate friend discovered how little he cared for his wife.

Morton was of a different temper, and for him life had another and more serious meaning. He inherited from his grandfather, Geoffrey Blake, something of that dogged and persevering spirit which had helped the penniless boy to fortune—something of the temper of those good old Puritan ancestors whose spotless repute in a lowly walk of life had been Geoffrey's proudest boast. Morton was ambitious. He was a strong politician. He hoped to sit in Parliament before long. He had thought deeply upon the most stirring questions of the time. He was as strong a Liberal as his grandfather had been, and he had an intense sympathy with the lower classes, and a fiery indignation against all oppressive legislation. He had read much, and thought much, and was thoroughly posted in all those subjects which enable a man to converse on equal terms with the best men of his age.

All his plans had been unsettled and thrown into abeyance by the events of the last six weeks.

Every faculty of his mind had been concentrated upon one work and one subject. And even now, though he tried to persuade himself that all was over, that his father's cruel death was soon to be bloodily avenged, and that there was no further duty left for the son to perform, still his mind was unsatisfied, there were lingering doubts unsolved, and he sought in vain for rest, and the power to resume his old studies with something of the old interest that had hitherto made them pleasant to him.

He closed the bulky volume, in which he had been reading a long debate upon the Poor Laws, with an impatient sigh.

'It is no use,' he said to himself, getting up and beginning to pace the room, as he always did when his mind was troubled. 'I sit staring at the page while my thoughts are far away. What did that man mean by his hints and half-expressed suggestions in his cross-examination of Sir Everard? A social mystery? What mystery? And how could it concern Sir Everard? Why did the counsel suggest that there might have been a break in the friendship

of Sir Everard and my father? Why did he ask if there had been any trouble about Lady Courtenay? No one ever hinted at such trouble or at any estrangement. What can have suggested such an idea to this scoundrel's advocate? I should like to see this Mr. Tomplin and have the matter out with him. A man has no right to drop hints of this kind if he has no ground for them.'

After walking slowly up and down the room for some time he came to a standstill before the large square window looking across the lawn and shrubbery to Tangley Common, and stood there watching the gardener sweeping the whitened paths, and shovelling the fallen leaves into his barrow, in an absent-minded way, like a man who has given himself up to absolute idleness of mind and body. But his thoughts were busy all the while, brooding upon points in the evidence at the trial, or upon the story he had heard last night.

'Who among all the men who were out hunting that day could have had a quarrel with my father, or any motive for murdering him?' he asked himself. 'I must try back. I must question those who knew

his life at that time. Aunt Dora, for instance. She lived with him for the last three years of his life, and they were devoted to each other. She must know everything. It isn't possible that he could have made an enemy without her knowledge. People who knew him have told me that he was the most open-hearted of men.'

He looked across the lawn at a figure that had just entered the gate, a figure that was strange to him. It was a youngish woman, neatly clad, with the air of a respectable servant, or small tradesman's wife. She was dressed in black, and as she passed in front of the study window on her way to the hall door, Morton saw that her pale face had a distressed and anxious expression.

Presently he heard voices in the hall, a woman's voice pleading, the authoritative tones of the butler answering. He opened his door and looked out.

'I can only state my business to Mr. Blake himself,' said the woman, looking piteously in at the door, which the butler guarded with his bulky person, 'and he would not know my name. Please say that a person in great trouble begs to see him.'



Let her in, Andrew,' said Morton, and then turning to the woman, who entered eagerly, he said, Come into my study, please, and tell me your business as briefly as you can. But if it is a case of distress, would it not be better for you to see my aunt, Miss Blake? She is relieving officer to all the parish, and will be more ready to sympathize with you than I can be.'

'No, sir. I'd rather talk to you, please. This is a matter that concerns you.'

'Indeed,' said Morton, surprised.

She was a nice-looking woman, of about two or three-and-thirty, with an intelligent face, bright gray eyes, and a resolute mouth—a woman who looked as if she could make her way through the world unaided, and would trouble no one with her needs or her sorrows. She had an honest, outspoken air which Morton liked.

'My name is Jane Barnard, sir,' said she. 'I am the eldest daughter of the miserable man who is to be hanged to-morrow week at Highclere.'

Morton's face grew black as thunder.

'Then I can have nothing to say to you!' he

exclaimed harshly: 'and I wonder at your audacity in coming here.'

'Oh, sir, don't say that,' pleaded the woman; 'don't harden your heart against me at the first, sir. If I didn't know that my father is innocent of that fearful crime I would never have crossed your threshold.'

'The crime was brought home to him,' said Morton.

'The robbery, sir, but not the murder. My father has done many evil things, but he was never a shedder of blood. Oh, sir, I saw him yesterday for the first time since I was eleven years old—a poor, feeble, broken-down creature—yet with something in his poor, pinched old face that brought back the time when I was a child, and used to clamber on his knees. He swore to me that he never did that dreadful deed. He took the money from the poor dead corpse, but he never harmed your father.'

'It is worse than folly to come to me with such a story as this. The man is condemned out of his own mouth. Why should he take upon himself a crime he had not committed? If he wanted the shelter of

a jail he would have confessed to the robbery only—supposing he were guiltless of the murder.’

‘He was desperate, sir, miserable and down-trodden, a mere worm for every one to kick out of their path. He was old and weak, and he hadn’t the pluck to take a rope and hang himself, and he knew if he gave himself over to the law an end would be made of him somehow. He didn’t feel that he cared whether he was hanged or not. His life was a burden to him, and he wanted to get rid of it. That is what he tried to make me understand yesterday.’

‘Well, he has got his wish,’ said Morton gloomily. ‘He will be hanged next week.’

‘Oh, please God not, sir. Surely people will lift up their voices to save such a feeble, wretched creature from a ghastly death. His heart fails him now that he sees himself face to face with death, and he prays that the poor remnant of his life may be spared, although he may have to spend his last days in prison. And he bade me tell you, sir, that he begs your pardon humbly for having made a false statement about the murder. He thinks the devil

must have driven him to tell those wicked lies which he told to Sir Everard Courtenay, and he prays you to help him if you can. And oh, sir, I entreat you to sign the memorial to the Home Secretary, and to do all you can to get the sentence commuted.'

'What, I am to intercede for the life of my father's murderer? When, after an interval of twenty years, justice is about to be done, I am to thrust myself in the way to prevent the carrying out of the sentence.'

'I tell you, sir, my father is innocent of that crime.'

'You tell me that he tells you so, and I answer that I don't believe him. Every murderer makes the same assertion; boldly, doggedly, asseverates his innocence; till he is at the foot of the scaffold and the game is lost, and then he coolly admits his guilt. Your father, after playing the braggadocio, and giving himself up in a heroic fashion, turns coward at the last and recants. He is not the less a murderer because he is afraid of the gallows. I will not sign the memorial, and I shall consider any person who does sign it as something less than my friend.'

‘Sir Everard Courtenay has signed it, sir. Indeed, I believe Sir Everard and Sir Nathaniel Ritherdon, the sheriff, were the gentlemen who started it.’

‘I am deeply offended with Sir Everard for his part in the matter. And now I must beg to conclude this interview. It is painful to me, and must be painful to you.’

‘I am not to be put aside, sir, because of a little pain. I have come all the way from America to help my father, and, God helping me, I will not leave a stone unturned in my effort to save him.’

‘You have come from America on purpose, have you? Why, the man, by his own account, is a worthless vagabond, who deserted his children and left them to rot in the workhouse.’

‘He is our father, sir—our own flesh and blood—and when we were little children, and lived on this estate, he was good and kind to us. I know that he was the worse for drink sometimes, even then, and that poor mother used to be sorrowful and downhearted about him, but he was fond of us all, and kind to us. It was only after your father turned us

out of our home, and my mother died, that he went wrong altogether, and left us to be taken care of by the parish. He is my father, sir, with all his faults, and I mean to do my duty to him ; and there's more than that for me to consider, sir. I have a good husband, and four dear children, in America, and I want to clear my father of this dreadful crime for their sakes. I don't want any one to be able to say that my father was hanged for murder, that my children have a murderer's blood in their veins. That would break my heart. My husband is a good, hardworking man, who has toiled to win a respectable place in the world—and he has won it, sir. He has a dry-goods store in Boston, and is looked up to as an honest tradesman ; and we have as good a home, sir, as any woman need wish for, though I was only a servant girl when I went out to America, and though after poor mother's death I was brought up in Highclere Union till I was fourteen years old, when they got me a nursemaid's place at a small shop-keeper's in the town. And my brothers were apprenticed ; and we've all done pretty well—some at home, some abroad—thanks be to God.'

‘How did you come to know of your father’s situation?’

‘One of my brothers sent me a newspaper, sir. I made up my mind to come home at once, and see my unhappy father. I didn’t believe he did it, even though he was his own accuser. My husband could not come with me without injuring his business, for he’s not in a large way, and he has to work hard in the store himself, and he’s liked, and looked up to. But he gave me all the money I wanted, and he’ll send me more, as I want it. I hoped to have been here before the trial, but the steamer only reached Liverpool the day before yesterday.’

There was a pause before Morton made any reply. He was standing by the window, looking out towards the common, as he looked before, but seeing nothing. His brows were bent with a resolute expression, which gave little hope of any softening in his feelings towards the prisoner in Highclere jail. The woman stood a few paces from him, with clasped hands, watching his face piteously.

‘I am very sorry for you, and I respect your purpose,’ he said, ‘but you cannot expect me to help you.

Not until you can bring before me evidence to prove that another man was my father's murderer can I bring myself to believe in your father's innocence. He has accused himself; and he must take the consequences of his own act.'

'Oh, sir, you are pitiless. How can I produce new evidence within a week—I, a friendless woman in a country that is almost strange to me after eighteen years' absence? Where and how am I to find the real murderer? But I know my father is innocent. He never did a cruel act in his life; he was never cruel to poor dumb things that came in his way. He loved his dog as if it had been his child. He might be weak and easily led away, but never hard or cruel. He could not have beaten a man's brains out on the highway for the sake of a few pounds. I came to you, Mr. Blake, thinking that you would help me; that you who suffered the loss of your father years ago, by a violent end, would feel for my grief to-day. I did not think it would be any satisfaction to you to have an innocent man hanged.'

'Prove his innocence if you can,' said Morton.

'I'll try,' she answered, and so left him, with a look that was almost sublime.



## CHAPTER XIV.

### THE YELLOW RIBBON.

TEARS were streaming down Jane Barnard's cheeks as she shut the door of Morton Blake's study, and turned to leave the house in which she had found so little comfort. Just at that moment Dora Blake came out of a room on the opposite side of the hall, and seeing the stranger's tearful face, went over to her and laid a gentle hand upon her shoulder.

'You are in trouble,' she said softly. 'Can I do anything to help you?'

The sweet, low voice, the grave, dark eyes, so full of pity, melted Jane Barnard's heart.

'Oh, madam,' she said, 'I am sure you are good and kind. If you are the Miss Blake I knew when I was a little girl, I know you are full of pity for poor folks. Yes, I am in great trouble, and I came to this house to find help, but I have found none.'

‘Come to my room,’ said Aunt Dora, opening a door at the back of the hall, and taking the stranger into her snug retreat, where she gave her a chair by the fire, and took the opposite chair for herself.

‘You say I knew you when you were a child; you are a native of this parish then, I conclude?’

‘Yes, madam, I was born close by, and we lived on your brother’s estate when I was a child. You used to come in to see my poor mother sometimes, and sit beside our fire and chat with her just as if you were friends and equals: not like some of the district ladies that go into poor folks’ cottages at meal-time and grumble at what they see on the table, and sit down and read the Bible to a working man at his dinner without asking by your leave, or with your leave. I’ve heard mother say your visits were like sunshine, Miss Blake.’

‘What was your mother’s name?’

‘Vargas.’

‘The name of the man who murdered my brother.’

‘The man who is in gaol, and who is to die

for that crime if nobody interferes to save him ; but not the man who did it. No, dear lady, if I did not know and feel, as surely as I know and feel that there is a sun in the sky, that my father is innocent of that cruel murder, I would never have crossed this threshold to-day. I would not dare to look you in the face. I would crawl out of your presence like a beaten dog.'

'How can we believe a man innocent of a crime which he has confessed, which the strongest evidence has brought home to him ?'

Jane Barnard pleaded her father's cause with Miss Blake as she had pleaded with Morton, and Aunt Dora listened with grave attention to every word the woman said. She was asked to believe a thing which seemed on the face of it incredible. She was asked to re-open a question which she thought at rest for ever. It had been an infinite relief to her to see the mystery of her brother's death finally solved, as she thought, although her tender heart pitied the forlorn wretch who was to suffer for the crime.

'How can I help you ?' she asked at last.

‘ You can help me in two ways, dear Miss Blake. First by signing the memorial which Sir Nathaniel Ritherdon and Sir Everard Courtenay have put in hand.’

‘ Sir Everard Courtenay !’ exclaimed Dora Blake.  
‘ What, is he trying to save your father ? ’

‘ He has signed the memorial. If you will sign it and induce your friends to sign it, the sentence may be commuted, my father’s life may be spared. You can help me still further, still better, by aiding me with your memory of years gone by to the discovery of the real murderer.’

Miss Blake started.

‘ You are mad to think of such a thing,’ she said.  
‘ If your father is not the murderer, who is to find the real criminal—who is to unravel a mystery which baffled the police when the crime was newly done, and evidence could more easily be had ? ’

‘ A resolute mind and an earnest purpose may do much, Miss Blake. I want to clear my father’s name for the sake of my husband and my children. James Barnard was better placed in the world than I was when he married me. He was the son of respectable

parents, well educated, in business for himself, and I was only a domestic servant. He stooped low enough when he chose me for his wife, but I don't want him to be told that he married a woman whose father was hanged for murder. I have come across the sea to save my father's life, and to clear his name, if it is to be done by a woman's work, and I think I'd rather die than go back to Boston without having done it.'

'I will sign the memorial, and induce others to sign it if I can,' said Miss Blake, after a silence of some moments. 'So far I am willing to help you; for it would be no comfort to me, in my life-long regret for my dear brother, to know that the man who killed him had died a shameful death. As for helping you to any discovery that could prove your father's innocence of the murder—there I can do nothing.'

'Are you sure of that, Miss Blake? Yet you must know many circumstances connected with your brother's death which are dark to me. If my father's story is true, and I firmly believe it, the man who killed Mr. Blake had but one motive, and that was to

take his life. Surely you must know if your brother had an enemy vindictive enough to make such a crime possible.'

'He had no such enemy,' said Dora Blake quickly, and then her eye grew troubled, and she glanced involuntarily towards the escritoire from which she had taken the packet of old letters on the night of Vargas's confession.

'He had no enemies,' she repeated; 'he was the kindest and most generous of men. He was not faultless—we are none of us free from the taint of sin, we all need pardon—but he was kind, and frank, and open-handed.'

'Miss Blake, you are a good woman, but I know you are keeping something from me,' said Mrs. Barnard, with an outspoken bluntness which savoured of her adopted country.

'You have no right to say such a thing,' faltered Dora.

'Have I not a right to say what I mean? We always do in America. I don't want to offend you, Miss Blake, for I have a grateful remembrance of your goodness to my poor mother, even

though your brother's harshness was the cause of her death.'

'My brother acted as any other landowner would have done under the circumstances. He turned your father off his estate for an offence that had been repeated so often that even his indulgent temper was provoked to punish it. He could have no foreknowledge of the fatal effect upon your mother's health that was to follow her leaving the cottage. If she had come to me in her trouble I might have been able to help her.'

'But you won't help me in my trouble by speaking your mind freely,' said Mrs. Barnard, with her shrewd gray eyes fixed on Dora Blake's pained face.

'I have said all that can be said. I will do all that can be done about the memorial. You must be content with the only aid I can give you.'

'So be it, Miss Blake. I am grateful for your kindness, even though you might have done more,' answered Jane Barnard, rising and taking a card from a little leather bag that hung on her

arm. 'This is my husband's business card, and my address in England is on the back. I have taken a lodging at Highclere—just one bedroom on a second floor, over a tobacconist's shop, for I want to save all my money for the work I have to do. If you should have anything to tell me, please write to me at that address.'

'I will be sure to do so. Believe me, I am deeply sorry for you.'

'I am sure of that, Miss Blake. Good-day.'

Mrs. Barnard curtesied, and left the room as Aunt Dora rang the bell for the servant to see her out.

When she was gone, Dora Blake sat by the fire for some time, lost in thought. Then she took her knitting out of a hanging pocket by the fireplace—a dainty thing of satin and point lace, made by Elizabeth's deft fingers—and began to knit. The needles flashed swiftly for a little while, and then Aunt Dora threw the work aside with an impatient sigh.

'If this man should be innocent,' she said to herself, 'and there should be any meaning in my



old fear—God forbid! God forbid! The thought has haunted me through all these years; and now, just when I believed it was laid at rest for ever, this woman's persistence calls up the old phantom—revives the old doubt.'

She unlocked the *escritoire*, opened the secret drawer, and took out the packet of letters tied with yellow ribbon.

Again she sat with the letters loose in her lap, looking them over as she had done that October night. She looked at the date of each letter till she came to the particular one she wanted, and then unfolded the paper with tremulous hands and read lines that were already familiar.

It was the shortest of all the letters, written in a hand that indicated haste and agitation in the writer. The date was October the nineteenth. No year; no address.

'He knows everything. Your letter of last night fell into his hands. I will tell you how, when we meet, though that matters very little. Oh, Walter, his anger was too terrible for words to describe. He was not loud or violent, but his

passion withered and blighted me. He knows now, what he has long suspected, that I never loved him, that I loved you first, last, always, and shall love you to my dying day. He laughed me to scorn when I told him that we were not the guilty creatures he might think us. "You are guilty of having lied to me from first to last," he said, "false wife, false friend. Would the measure of your guilt be fuller if you were"—and then came words I cannot write, and I think I must have fainted, for I remember nothing more till I found Lucy hanging over me with smelling salts and hartshorn, and the rain and wind blowing in across my face from the open window.

'You had better hunt to-morrow as you intended. Perhaps he will write to you. Perhaps he may try to see you. Oh, my dearest, be patient, be forbearing, for my sake. Tell him that our only sin against him is that we loved each other before ever I saw his face, and have gone on loving each other ever since. Even in the midst of his anger, when his words were most cruel, I was sorry for him. Oh, Walter, can there be a greater crime than such a

marriage as mine? What folly, what weakness, what wickedness is worse than that of a woman who lets herself be sold into loveless bondage. Yet my father and mother think themselves good and virtuous, and that they have done their duty to me. My broken heart cries out against such duty to-day. I dare not write more. My only chance of getting this letter conveyed to you is to send it by Lucy this instant. She is very good to me, and I think she is true. Yours in life and death.'

There was no signature. Dora Blake was still sitting with this letter in her hand, her eyes filling with tears as she read, when she started at the sound of a gay, light-hearted voice in the hall—a girlish voice talking bright, girlish talk.

She replaced the letters in the escritoire with hurried, nervous hands, not stopping to tie the ribbon round them, or to put them back in the secret drawer, but throwing them in anyhow, and hastily locking the escritoire. She had but just turned the key when the door of her room was thrown open and her niece Clementine came in, followed by Dulcie in her fur jacket and hat.

‘Dear Aunt Dora, I thought I was never going to see you again,’ said Dulcie, kissing Miss Blake on both cheeks, ‘so I ordered the pony carriage an hour after breakfast, and came over to ask what had become of you all.’

‘We have been so agitated, so anxious,’ faltered Dora Blake, ‘about this dreadful trial.’

‘Yes, naturally, poor darlings. But now that it’s all over, and that the miserable wretch is going to be hanged—though I can’t help hoping he won’t be—surely we are all going to be happy again.’

‘I hope so, Dulcie.’

‘As to Morton, I have hardly known him since this terrible business began. I don’t think he has given me a thought. If I had been his wife he could scarcely have shown me less attention: and it isn’t fair that he should anticipate the indifference of matrimony, is it, auntie?’

Dulcie had adopted Miss Blake as an aunt at the very beginning of her engagement, and made a strong point of her claims as a niece.

‘No, my pet. It is not fair,’ answered Dora,

smiling at the bright face and pouting lips, yet with a pained feeling at her heart all the time, and grave doubt as to whether happiness were as near and as certain as Dulcie fancied.

‘Morton has made himself intensely disagreeable for the last six weeks, and now the trial is over he doesn’t seem much better,’ protested Tiny. ‘He was hideously grumpy all breakfast time. He hadn’t a word to throw at a dog.’

‘Oh, what a pretty ribbon!’ cried Dulcie, suddenly desecring something on the floor. ‘What a funny old-fashioned colour!’

It was the yellow ribbon that had been tied round the packet of letters, which Miss Blake had dropped in her confusion just now. Dulcie was on her knees upon the Persian rug, with the ribbon in her hand.

‘Where did it come from?’ she asked; ‘it looks half a century old. It reminds me of Miss Austen’s novels, and the days when Bath was the centre of fashion, and when girls danced at the Assembly Rooms in white muslin frocks and coral necklaces.’

‘It is an old ribbon that I found years ago,’ answered Miss Blake. ‘I used it to tie up some papers.’

‘Such a ribbon ought never to have tied up anything less romantic than love letters, auntie,’ said Dulcie, twisting the yellow satin round her fingers, and admiring its smooth texture. ‘People don’t manufacture such satin as this now-a-days. They are not honest enough. Dear old relic of a departed age, when girls played the harpsichord and danced country dances! I hope you did not use it to tie up butchers’ bills. You are so terribly business-like sometimes.’

‘Tell us about the dinner at Mother Aspinall’s,’ asked Tiny, who was appallingly disrespectful to her pastors and masters, and all people to whom she was called upon to do homage. ‘Was it good fun?’

‘Tiny, how can you speak of her like that?’ remonstrated Aunt Dora.

‘You don’t approve of my calling her mother? But why not? Surely it’s a venerable title, generally considered almost a sacred name. If she were the superior of a convent she would be called Reverend

Mother. Do tell us about the dinner. She is always asking Morton, and hardly ever asks us, which I call insulting. But no doubt she considers three women out of one family too great a trial; so she fobs us off with her annual garden party, and allows us to struggle in a crowd of nobodies for cold tea and warm ices. Was it fun, Dulcie?’

‘It was rather nice,’ answered Dulcie, dimpling with sudden smiles. ‘Morton was there, you know, and Lord Beville, and I am afraid he was rather more attentive to me than Morton quite liked. He would talk, don’t you know, and he didn’t seem to understand that Morton and I had any right to shut him out of our conversation. As for Mrs. Aspinall, she was intensely kind—so very effusive to me that she really put the oddest ideas into my mind.’

‘What do you call odd ideas?’

‘I could not help thinking that she was rather anxious to fascinate papa, and that she would not at all object to be my stepmother.’

Tiny burst into a ringing laugh.

‘Not object, indeed! Why, she would give her eyes, or at any rate her eyebrows—she could easily

buy another pair—for such a chance. Artful old party! But you are not afraid of your pater being caught by her elderly wiles, are you, Dulcie? After having been twenty years a widower he is not very likely to marry again.'

'Oh, no,' answered Dulcie, with a happy smile, 'I have no fear of that. I sent the ponies round to the stables, auntie, for I thought perhaps you would not mind having me to lunch.'

'Mind having you!' echoed Miss Blake, taking the girl in her arms and kissing her tenderly, 'my darling, your presence is like sunshine in the house. Mind having you, my pet! God grant that many of our future days may be spent together.'

This was said with deep feeling, with an unusual earnestness, which impressed Dulcie. It was almost as if there was some foreboding of evil in Dora Blake's mind as she breathed this prayer.

'What does that horrid brother of mine mean by shutting himself up in his study all the morning?' exclaimed Tiny. 'He must have heard Dulcie's voice in the hall just now, unless love is deaf as well as blind? I'll go and unearth him.'



‘Please don’t,’ cried Dulcie; ‘I came to see Aunt Dora and you. I see Morton at home, you know.’

‘That’s all very well, but he mustn’t be inattentive. There goes the gong for luncheon. Auntie dear, you are looking ever so pale and fagged this morning. Have you and Tibbs been worrying over the house accounts?’

‘No, dear, I never worry about accounts.’

‘I know you are a model housekeeper, you sweet old auntie, liberal without wastefulness, indulgent but never lax,’ said Tiny. ‘I’m afraid when I’ve a house everything in it will run to seed in a dreadful way for want of being looked after. I so detest the details of domesticity.’

The three ladies found Morton in the hall ready to escort Dulcie to the pretty, bright-looking dining-room, where the luncheon table was all abloom with white and purple chrysanthemums, and where Horatia and Lizzie Hardman joined them at the social, unceremonious meal.

Among so many there was plenty of conversation, but neither Dora Blake nor her nephew took an

active part in it. The young ladies discussed their favourite subjects, novels, crewel-work, conservatories, dress, and the floating gossip of the neighbourhood. There was a general light-heartedness which made up for Morton's silence and his aunt's abstracted manner.

'Now, dearest auntie, I want you to take me round the gardens, and show me the hothouses,' said Dulcie coaxingly, putting her arm through Miss Blake's as they rose from the table. 'I have made up my mind for an afternoon's talk with you, and I shall only go home in time to give papa his tea.'

'There is nothing I should like better, my pet,' answered Dora; 'but this afternoon it is impossible. I have to drive to Highclere upon a matter of business. I must leave you to the three girls and Morton, who will be delighted to show you the houses—not that they contain anything very grand just now.'

'Business at Highclere, auntie!' said Tiny; 'what can that be? I hope you are not going to visit that horrid man in the gaol, to hear him his catechism, or to teach him to sing a hymn. You are quite capable of it.'

‘No, dear, I am not going to the gaol.’

‘For these and all Thy mercies—’ murmured Tiny, as if she were saying grace.

And then she wreathed her arm round Dulcie’s waist, and appropriated her for the rest of the afternoon, allowing Morton to dance attendance upon them in and out of hothouses and greenhouses, and all over the spacious gardens. In Dulcie’s company he managed to forget his perplexities, which had been increased by that unpleasant visit from Vargas’s daughter.

## CHAPTER XV.

### DORA BLAKE ASKS A QUESTION.

MISS BLAKE drove into Highclere, and stopped just outside that quaint old town at a handsome red-brick house, with a lawn and shrubbery in front of it. This was the house of Sir Nathaniel Ritherdon, a gentleman of good old family, who had married the only daughter and heiress of a wealthy Blackford manufacturer, and had fortified his position by an alliance which his relations affected to despise. He was an elderly man, pompous but kindly, and very popular in the district. He had been one of Walter Blake's most intimate friends, and it seemed a natural thing for Dora to come to him in her trouble.

For the first time in her life she asked for the master of the house instead of the mistress.

'I want to see Sir Nathaniel on a matter of business,' she said; 'I shall be glad to see Lady Ritherdon afterwards.'

She was ushered at once into Sir Nathaniel's library—a room as portly, rubicund, and pompous as its owner. Tall mahogany bookcases, filled with formidable folios and fat octavos in crimson russia, crimson morocco armchairs, red and green Turkey carpet, crimson velvet curtains, crimson velvet mantelpiece, bronze clock ticking loud enough for a county jail, ruddy fire in shining steel grate. Sir Nathaniel's despatch box, big enough for a Prime Minister, open before him; Sir Nathaniel's presentation silver inkstand at his side; Sir Nathaniel himself indulging in a surreptitious nap.

He started up at the entrance of Miss Blake, and looked about him for a moment or two, with a scared glance, like a guilty creature.

"Hum—haw—my dear Miss Blake, this is a pleasant surprise. I was so deeply absorbed in—aw—local cases that your name came upon me with—er—like—er—a reminiscence of by-gone days. Sit down, nearer the fire, pray now——"

'My dear Sir Nathaniel, forgive me for saying so, but your room is like a tropical house. I'd rather sit as far from the fire as I can.'

‘Do you really find the room warm? I was absolutely feeling chilly. But at my age the blood circulates feebly. Have you seen Lady Ritherdon? If not, let me send for her; she will be delighted at this visit.’

‘I am going to see her presently; but I want first to have a little quiet talk with you.’

‘If I can be of service to you in any way——’

‘I believe you can, and to the cause of humanity. I hear that you have started a memorial to the Home Secretary in favour of Humphrey Vargas.’

‘Well, really now, Miss Blake, I like to be conscientious even in small matters, and, to speak by the card, I must tell you that it was not I who set this memorial on foot, though my signature heads the list. It was Sir Everard Courtenay’s idea. He was urgent about the matter on the night after the trial—stayed behind when my other guests had gone, on purpose to talk to me about it. He takes a very merciful view of the case, bearing in mind such extenuating circumstances as the man’s age, his self-surrender, and so forth. Very good of him, isn’t it? And yet Sir Everard has

been thought rather a hard man—self-contained, wrapped up in his own sorrows, and his own immediate interests.’

‘Yes, it is good in him,’ Miss Blake said slowly, looking down at the crimson hearth-rug with a thoughtful face. ‘And I know that you are good, Sir Nathaniel, so I have come to plead the cause of a poor woman who was with me to-day, Vargas’s daughter.’

‘The woman who has come over from America?’ interrogated Sir Nathaniel.

‘Yes.’

‘She has been with me this afternoon—an extraordinary woman, a little queer in her head, I’m afraid. She vehemently protests her father’s innocence of the murder, and seems to believe it herself.’

‘Then you know all I can tell you. It is on that poor woman’s account I am here. I promised her that I would sign the memorial, and that I would do all in my power to promote its success. But my influence is so little. Now if you would take the matter in hand, Sir Nathaniel, success would be certain.’

Miss Blake knew that the high sheriff delighted

in having something to be fussy about, some philanthropic or political excuse for making prosy speeches, and writing still prosier letters.

‘My dear lady,’ he responded with a gratified air, ‘for your sake I would adopt even a worse cause. The woman impressed me as a lunatic; but if you have taken her under your wing she shall have the shelter of mine: and whatever I can do to secure a favourable answer to the memorial shall be done. We are not over-fond of hanging now-a-days, thank Heaven. We accept capital punishment as a terrible necessity; but we are very glad to slip out of inflicting it when we can find a reasonable excuse for mercy.’

There was a silence of a minute or so, while Sir Nathaniel shut his despatch box, with the air of having done a hard day’s work, and threw himself back in his red morocco chair, the hue of which exactly matched the port-winey tints in his own complexion.

He saw that his visitor was deep in thought, and solaced himself with a pinch of snuff out of his massive gold box, while he politely awaited her next observation.



I think you were out hunting the day my brother was killed,' she said at last.

Sir Nathaniel was a little startled by the abruptness of the remark.

'Yes, poor fellow, I was with him. We rode together for some time.'

'Did he seem in his usual spirits?'

'Well, no, Miss Blake. That is a curious circumstance, which my memory dwelt on afterwards. Poor Blake was not in his accustomed good spirits. You know what a jolly fellow he was, what a glorious fellow. Of course you do; nobody can know it better. Well, on that fatal day he seemed depressed, absent, out of sorts. He rode wild too, and didn't seem to care where he went. Superstitious people have a notion that a man about to die a sudden or violent death has a presentiment of his fate, even in the heyday of health and strength. And my recollection of poor Blake's manner on that day would go far to justify the notion.'

'You do not know of his having had a dispute of any kind—a quarrel, even—with any one who was out that day?'

‘A quarrel—Blake! The best-natured of men—a man whom everybody liked. Why, my dear Miss Blake, what could put such an idea into your head?’

‘One can never be sure. A man may be kind and open-hearted, and yet may make enemies. Sir Everard Courtenay said at the trial that my brother was in his usual spirits. Do you know if those two were riding together much during the day?’

Sir Nathaniel looked thoughtful. He was called upon to remember the details of a day’s sport twenty years old. True that the day had been fatal to one of his friends, and that events otherwise insignificant had been made remarkable by the tragic sequel of the sport.

‘Now you force me to carry back my memory to that particular occasion, it occurs to me that Blake and Sir Everard did not ride side by side once during the day’s work. There was a good deal of waiting about; and it struck me, I remember, that Sir Everard and your brother were not quite so friendly as usual. They seemed to

avoid each other, as if they didn't care about meeting. Mind you, the thing may have been only my imagination, but it certainly did occur to me at the time. Good God! could that have been in the counsel's mind when he put such curious questions to Sir Everard—could he know anything——'

'Mr. Blake,' announced the butler at this moment. He had opened the door with well-bred noiselessness half-a-minute before he made this announcement, and Morton Blake had heard the latter part of Sir Nathaniel's speech.

## CHAPTER XVI.

‘I MUST BE BEHIND THE AGE.’

‘You here, Morton!’ exclaimed Miss Blake, rising with an agitated air at her nephew’s entrance.

‘Yes, my dear aunt. How do you do, Sir Nathaniel? I heard my aunt was driving into Highclere, and I fancied she might be coming to see Lady Ritherdon.’

‘I thought you would spend the rest of the afternoon with Dulcie,’ said his aunt.

‘Dulcie had had enough of the hothouses by four o’clock, so I put her into her pony carriage and rode over here. I want a little quiet talk with Sir Nathaniel when you’ve quite done with him.’

‘Why should you not talk before me, Morton? I think I know what you want to talk about. It is a subject that concerns me as nearly as it does you. Cannot you trust me, Morton?’

‘I don’t know. I feel sometimes as if I could

trust no one—as if I were surrounded by smooth-faced traitors. What is the meaning of this memorial, Sir Nathaniel, and why have you signed it? Surely if that man is guilty he deserves to die. There was never a more brutal murder—there was never a fitter subject for the gallows.’

‘He is old and broken down,’ faltered Sir Nathaniel.

‘Is that any reason he should be spared? What is his wretched remnant of existence when weighed against my father’s prime of life—full of hope and gladness and benevolent thoughts and deeds? Blood for blood—a life for a life. That is the divine law, which Christ came to fulfil and not to destroy.’

‘Christ forgave the penitent thief; and this man is penitent,’ pleaded Dora Blake.

‘The only pardon his penitence can deserve is a pardon beyond the grave. Sir Nathaniel, I want to know, whether this memorial was your idea?’

‘It was not. Sir Everard Courtenay was the man who started it.’

‘I thought as much. Sir Everard has taken a

philanthropic view of this business from the outset. He has shown a scrupulous desire to avoid the shedding of blood.'

'My dear Blake, it is natural for you to feel strongly upon this subject, but you must consider that there is a growing prejudice against capital punishment.'

'I wish there was a growing prejudice against murder,' said Morton gloomily. 'What was it that you feared might be in the counsel's mind when he asked Sir Everard those extraordinary questions about his wife?'

Sir Nathaniel hesitated, and looked nervously at Miss Blake.

'Come, Sir Nathaniel, be frank with me. You were my father's friend.'

'Everybody who knew your father was his friend.'

'Yet the counsel suggested that he might have had a secret enemy, and the drift of his examination tended to show that Sir Everard Courtenay might have been that enemy. Sir Nathaniel, Aunt Dora, for God's sake do not try to keep me in the

dark upon this subject if your knowledge can enlighten me. My father had been Lady Courtenay's suitor before her marriage. So much Sir Everard admitted. Do you know if there was any jealousy in Sir Everard's mind after his marriage? Do you know if he had any reason for resentment?'

'I never heard such an idea hinted,' said Sir Nathaniel decidedly. 'So far as I know, Lady Courtenay's character was spotless.'

'What was it then that you feared might be in the counsel's mind when he questioned Sir Everard?'

'It occurred to me during the hunt on the day before poor Blake's death that he and Sir Everard were not quite so friendly in their manner to each other as they had usually been. There was something that looked like a tacit avoidance on both sides. Remember, Blake, this may have been only a fancy on my part.'

'Possibly. Yet it is a circumstance to be remembered.'

'Morton,' cried Miss Blake, turning her pale, perturbed face to her nephew with a look of tender

entreaty, 'for Dulcie's sake, for your own, shut your mind against these vague suspicions. You cannot suppose that Sir Everard Courtenay, the man you have long known and respected, your father's old college friend, was in any manner implicated in that cruel murder?'

'Why does he try to save the murderer's life?'

'That is an act of common humanity.'

'I must be behind the age,' said Morton bitterly. 'I am sadly wanting in Christian-like compassion for my father's murderer. Come, Aunt Dora, Sir Nathaniel has frankly stated his opinion about Lady Courtenay. You were silent just now. Are you of the same opinion? Did you know anything in my father's lifetime of relations between him and Lady Courtenay which would have been likely to disturb Sir Everard's peace?'

'Nothing.'

'Then I am justified in believing that Mr. Tomplin's suggestions had no better foundation than a prurient imagination.'

'Assuredly. Mr. Tomplin could know nothing.'

'Thank God. For Dulcie's sake; yes, for



Dulcie's sake! Do you suppose I would willingly give my mind to any suspicion that involved her father? Yet doubts have forced themselves upon me—doubts that have made me miserable. Last night I heard it suggested that the man who murdered my father was on horseback, a horseman who followed him after the hunt: and now to-day this woman comes to me with her assertion of her father's innocence, and with an air of truth about her that has impressed me in spite of myself.'

'Such a belief is only natural in a daughter,' said Miss Blake.

'True: and Shafto Jebb's idea about the horseman may be mere folly. He is the kind of man who likes to originate some startling theory. I have been so worried about this matter that I'm afraid I left Dulcie rather hurriedly. I'll ride over to Fairview. Good-bye, Sir Nathaniel. Don't wait dinner for me, auntie.'

He left without waiting for another word, mounted his horse, and started at a sharp trot for Austhorpe, full of tender thoughts about Dulcie. He fancied that he had been careless, neglectful of

her during her visit to the Manor-house, and he was eager to make amends.

'My sweet Dulcie! And to think that my father once loved her mother. There seems a fatality in it. But I will not believe that my father could act dishonourably; that, having tried his chance and lost it, he would give his rival cause for jealousy. No. Everybody tells me that he was frank and open-hearted, true as steel. Such a man could never have stooped to treachery.'

## CHAPTER XVII.

### COME TO GRIEF.

It was the 19th of December, two days before the Monday appointed for Humphrey Vargas's execution, and there had been as yet no commutation of the sentence. Very few people were thinking of the condemned criminal on this clear winter morning, for there were pleasanter subjects for thought amongst the crowd on Tangley Common, where the South Daleshire Hunt met for the first time this season. There had been a hunt breakfast at the Manor House, and Andrew and his subordinates were now going about with tankards and decanters for the refreshment of those horsemen who had not availed themselves of their opportunities indoors. Between thirty and forty horsemen were gathered on the smooth stretch of sward in front of the Manor House railings, and the road before the house was crowded with carriages. The hounds

were clustered on a grassy knoll apart, with huntsman and whipper-in keeping guard over their movements, while the master trotted here and there on his powerful chestnut, big with the business of the day. There were half-a-dozen ladies among the red and dark coats; a brace of farmer's daughters, rosy-cheeked, buxom; Mrs. Upham, the lawyer's wife, who, according to popular opinion, ought to have been at home minding her children, instead of scouring the country on her husband's gaunt gray gig-horse; Miss Morrison, a small squire's daughter, out with her father, a plethoric, sandy-whiskered man in a well-worn scarlet coat and mahogany tops; Mrs. Tilson Tudley, from Highclere, a half-pay major's wife; and lastly, on a perfect hunter, in a habit of perfect cut, with the neatest little chimney-pot hat and the newest thing in white ties, Lady Frances Grange, the finest horsewoman in that part of Daleshire.

'How is it that the Blatchmardean people contrive to ride such good horses?' asked Mrs. Tilson Tudley of Mr. Upham, with an envious glance at Lady Frances's thoroughbred brown. I thought they were as poor as church mice.'

‘So they are,’ answered Jack Upham, replying for his wife, who had as much as she could do to keep her ungainly gray from getting his hind legs into a concatenation with the hind legs of other horses, all shifting and wheeling and fidgeting in their eagerness for the fray. ‘They’ve precious little money for people in their position; but as Lord Blatchmardean never spends anything except upon his stables he contrives to cut a tidy figure there. He lets everything else at the castle run to seed.’

‘I believe Lady Frances has hardly a second gown to her back,’ said Mrs. Tudley; ‘Lady Ritherdon told me that she was tired of seeing her in black net and yellow roses.’

‘Yet she always looks well,’ said Upham; ‘she was out and away the best dancer at the hospital ball—among the girls,’ added the lawyer, reminded by a vindictive glance that the lady to whom he was talking prided herself particularly upon her waltzing.

‘It’s a pity she can’t get married,’ drawled Mrs. Tudley, languidly compassionate.

‘Can’t!’ exclaimed Mrs. Upham. ‘She’s not

much more than twenty, and she may never have seen anybody she cares about.'

'Oh, but don't you know girls in that rank are expected to marry young? A girl of that kind is brought up to make a good marriage, and if she doesn't do it in her second or third season she is stamped with failure. Now, Lady Fanny has had two seasons in London with her aunt, Lady Luffington, and nothing has come of it. I should put her down as a decided failure, though she really has very nice ways, and is rather good style.'

'Don't you think her pretty?'

'No,' said Mrs. Tudley decisively. 'Too thin, too brown, too angular.'

'But surely she has fine eyes?'

'I didn't say she was hideous,' retorted Mrs. Tudley, with acidity.

She had met Lady Frances at the hospital ball, and at Lady Ritherdon's annual garden party, which was an *omnium gatherum* for half the county, and on the strength of these two public encounters affected, in her conversation with people of Mrs. Upham's class, to be in the Blatchmardean set; but the

consciousness that she was out of it gave a subdued sourness to her tone whenever Lady Frances was talked about.

That young lady and her brother, Lord Beville, had ridden into the Manor House shrubbery to talk to Dora Blake and her nieces. Lady Frances was bending from her saddle to say something confidential to Tiny, who was her particular favourite in the family. Morton was on the common with Sir Everard and his daughter, who had driven to the meet in a mail phaeton.

‘I wonder why Miss Courtenay doesn’t hunt, speculated Frances, glancing across the laurels at the group on the common. ‘Her father keeps plenty of horses. She might as well enjoy her life.’

‘I don’t know that she would care about it,’ said Tiny, ‘and I know Morton wouldn’t like it.’

‘Oh, he doesn’t like women to hunt, I suppose,’ said Lady Frances, reddening a little.

‘Can’t bear hunting women. If it wasn’t for that I should hunt. Butterfly jumps beautifully, and she’s considered my particular property, don’t you know? But when I gently suggested riding her to

hounds Morton looked as black as thunder, and protested that no sister of his should ever unsex herself by scampering over hedges and ditches, and cannoning at gates, amongst a herd of rough farmers and impertinent cockneys. Rather narrow-minded of him, isn't it ?'

'Well, it's hardly what I should have expected from an advanced Liberal ; but I believe men who take a wide view in politics think themselves privileged to have narrow ideas about everything else. I wish you were coming with us, Tiny, all the same. I'm sure you would enjoy it.'

'Enjoy it? I should fancy myself in heaven! If ever I marry a nice, biddable man, I shall hunt four times a week.'

Lord Beville rode in to say that they were moving, and Lady Frances trotted gaily off by his side, but the gaiety was rather in the movement of her lively young horse than in her own face, which was grave and even troubled.

They stopped to speak to Sir Everard and Dulcie, and to Morton, whose horse was drawn up beside the phaeton, and who seemed indifferent to the



prospects of the day, in his delight at being with Dulcie.

She was looking her fairest and brightest, as if something had happened to put her in particular good spirits.

‘We are going to draw Yarfield Gorse,’ said Morton. ‘You might drive a good way with us, Sir Everard.’

‘Do, papa,’ said Dulcie, so the phaeton followed among the horsemen, together with various pony chaises and family vehicles of the wagonette or inside-car species, which provoked some muttered animadversion from the hunting men.

It was a lovely morning, clear, balmy, with a warm south-west wind gently stirring the last leaves upon the young trees, and bearing in its breath the perfume of distant pine-woods, and the fresh, cool odour of newly-ploughed uplands; the sunshine lit up the ragged hedges, where the blackberry leaves still hung, beautiful in their decay with every variety of tint, from green to bronze, from crimson to darkest purple, and where the hawthorn berries glittered like jewels against their russet background. The

narrow winding river yonder in the valley reflected the blue of a sky that was almost without a cloud. Every vestige of last week's frost had disappeared.

Morton felt the influence of this genial atmosphere, the beauty of earth and sky. He was well mounted, and moderately fond of hunting—not an enthusiast like his father, but able to enjoy a good run in a pleasant country, with all nature smiling at him. A long day in a Scotch mist, over ground in which his horse sank to the shoulder, was not his idea of bliss, even though the scent lay well, and the run was popularly supposed to be the best of the season. To-day he was in excellent spirits. He had spent a good deal of his life with Dulcie during the last week, and he had made up his mind to be happy. Yet even to-day, the sight of Shafto Jebb pounding along on a mealy chestnut unpleasantly recalled that conversation which he had overheard at the Sugar-Loaves, and gave him an uncomfortable feeling.

He was riding on a strip of turf beside the road, Lady Frances Grange and Lord Beville by his side. Morton and Frances were old friends. He and Beville had been together at Rugby, chums at school and at

home, and Morton had been on the pleasantest terms at Blatchmardean ever since those old Rugby days. He was as much at his ease with Frances Grange as with his own sisters. Before his engagement to Dulcie he had been in the habit of spending a good deal of his leisure at Blatchmardean, playing billiards with Lord Beville, taking lessons in farming from the old earl, dawdling about the neglected gardens and shrubberies with Frances. At home he was always full of work, but at Blatchmardean, where nobody had any turn for industry, he was contented to waste his time. Blatchmardean was his place of rest and recreation. Then came his engagement to Sir Everard Courtenay's daughter, and it seemed as if all those idle hours in the library—to which nobody had added a book for the last forty years—in the billiard-room, and in the picturesque old gardens, were over and done with for ever. He called at the castle now and then, just often enough to escape the charge of neglecting old friends, but he dawdled away life there no longer. All his leisure was devoted to Dulcie.

Neither Frances nor her brother resented this

defection. They accepted it as an inevitable consequence of new ties, a new and absorbing affection.

‘Morton is terribly earnest,’ said Beville; ‘he never does anything by halves. I am glad neither you nor I take life as seriously as he does, Fan.’

Frances answered with a faint sigh.

‘Perhaps we are wrong and he is right. Life may be a much more solemn business than we think, and its seriousness may be brought home to our frivolous minds one day in some unpleasant manner.’

Beville could not bring himself to the consideration of a question so metaphysical.

‘I don’t know about that,’ he said. ‘I hope we shall always manage to rub on somehow.’

Frances missed her old companion sorely at first, missed him always, indeed, for her friends at Blatchmardean were not many. The earl did not encourage society of any kind.

‘We can just afford to keep ourselves,’ he said; ‘but we can’t afford to be eaten out of house and home by other people.’

So there were no visitors coming to stay at the castle, no roster of guests, one set departing as

another set arrived. No clubable men came from afar to shoot Lord Blatchmardean's pheasants, or to smoke in the big stone hall which served for lounge and billiard-room. Two or three times in the season the earl would ask a neighbour to join him in his day's sport, but for the rest of the time he and Beville and the gamekeeper shot the birds, and enjoyed their pic-nic luncheons of bread and cheese and Bass with a relish which not every man can experience whose mid-day appetite is coaxed by Périgord pies and choice liqueurs. Sometimes Frances was allowed to accompany her father and brother on their long tramps through boggy plantations, over deep beds of fallen leaves, and showed herself as good a shot as either of them. Beville had taught her to handle a gun before she was twelve years old, just as he had taught her to ride, and to fence, and to play cricket, making her his companion in all things.

It had happened, therefore, that Morton, being Beville's chosen chum, had become, in the common course of things, Lady Frances Grange's chief male friend—indeed, her only one—a little given to

lecturing; but if a girl likes a man she likes to be lectured by him; not at all given to flattery; but Lady Frances detested compliments. He had been kind and attentive to her always, bringing her such books as she cared to read, such songs as she cared to sing, all of the lightest and airiest character. He had taken care that she was supplied with flowers and fruit from the extensive hothouses at Tangley. He had made it a point with his womenkind that they should visit her, and invite her to their house, and make much of her. And then, just as the family at the Manor had made up their minds that Lady Frances Grange was to be Lady Frances Blake, Morton had fallen head over ears in love with Sir Everard Courtenay's daughter.

His aunt Dorothea went so far as to tell him that she had always supposed Frances would be his wife.

'My dearest aunt, what could put such an idea into your head?' he exclaimed, with a look of wonder which proclaimed his perfect innocence. 'I like Fan immensely. I am just as fond of her as I am of my sisters, but the notion of marrying her never came into my head.'

‘All I hope is that has it never come into hers,’ replied Miss Blake gravely. ‘I used to wonder, certainly, that you should choose a girl brought up as she has been, with such exclusively masculine surroundings—a girl whose tastes are all masculine. But she is graceful and attractive, and I thought——’

‘You thought quite wrong, dear auntie, as you far-seeing women often do, when you speculate about other people’s affairs,’ Morton answered lightly, and no more had ever been said upon the subject.

Miss Blake and her nieces still called upon Lady Frances Grange, and invited her to the Manor House ; and the friendship, without being absolutely enthusiastic, went on pleasantly enough.

Nothing in Frances’s manner from first to last indicated that she felt she had any right to be offended at Morton’s choice, or that she was so offended. She talked freely of Dulcie, and praised her warmly.

‘Your brother could not have made a better choice,’ she said to Clementine and Horatia. ‘You know that in a general way I detest girls—your

sweet selves of course, excepted—but I consider Dulcie simply perfect.'

. . . . .

And now carriages and horses had arrived at Yarfield Gorse, a wild bit of land on the slope of a hill crested with fir trees, and here the serious business of the day began. There was a good deal of cantering about and about in a seemingly purposeless manner, which the people in the carriages were able to see; a good deal of dismounting and tightening of girths, and a general getting ready for the fray, and then all in a moment there came the shrill cry, 'Gone away,' the hounds went leaping and tumbling over the hillocky ground like a flash of living light, and the field rushed helter-skelter after them in a hand gallop, with Lady Frances and Morton in the first flight.

There was a narrow bit of plough, a hedge, and then a splendid stretch of pasture, where the quiet store cattle stood at gaze, wondering at the whoop and riot of the chase, as it sped by them and was gone. Perhaps as they settled down placidly to their grazing, they were half disposed to believe that the



whole thing had been a vision—a phenomenal appearance in the air.

‘Stick by me,’ cried Frances, looking round at Morton, as she took the hedge. ‘I know every inch of the country. Isn’t this glorious?’ she asked, as they were galloping smoothly across the grass, neck and neck, with only the huntsman and a chosen few skimming along in front of them.

Morton could not deny that it was so, though he had made up his mind long ago that hunting women were detestable, and had told Tiny so when she wished to ride Butterfly to hounds. The fresh, clear air, the open country, the sense of being borne along by an animal powerful enough to carry him to the end of the earth, or at least to the edge of the horizon yonder, where the distant woods made a line of purple against the clear blue sky—all these filled him with delight. He forgot that this girl by whose side he rode was not Dulcie, that it was in some measure a treason against Dulcie that he should be utterly happy in her company; he forgot everything except the keen rapture of being carried across that

level pasture to the gap yonder through which the hounds were just scrambling.

And though he had stigmatized hunting as an unfeminine pursuit, he could but own to himself that Frances Grange had never looked more exquisitely girlish than at this moment, as her slight figure moved in sympathy with every movement of her horse, and the delicate oval of her cheek warmed with a flush of tenderest carmine, while her dark eyes sparkled with delight.

‘He’s making for the water!’ she cried, ‘and the bank’s horridly risky! No matter—we can’t lose them.’

‘You’d better go round,’ remonstrated Morton ‘there’s a shallow ford lower down.’

‘Go round!’ she cried contemptuously; ‘we might as well go to London. I shall risk the dip yonder. You needn’t come unless you like. What’s become of Beville?’

There was no one in front of them but the officials and the master, with about half a dozen of the hardest riders, amongst whom Frances could not distinguish her brother’s figure. Behind them the field had scattered wide, some having found a gate in

the corner of the pasture, while the rest had taken the hedge at different points.

Beville, who was always well to the fore, could hardly be among these ; but there was no time to wonder about him. Fox and hounds were on the other side of the narrow river, and a few of the horsemen were scrambling down the bank, while the prudent ones galloped off to find an easier passage.

‘ There are a lot refusing,’ cried Morton ; ‘ you’d better come round.’

‘ Good-bye,’ retorted Frances, waving her hunting crop.

Morton was not to be dismissed so cavalierly. He put his trust in Providence and a clever hunter, and followed Lady Frances.

The stream, about four feet deep, ran at the bottom of a hollow, the steep bank made dangerous by brushwood and mountain ashes and alders. There was hardly room for a horse to squeeze himself between the trees, and the clay bank was so rugged and treacherous that it needed a clever animal to keep his footing in the scramble down to the water. One man had had his ducking already, and was

chasing his horse across the next field : but Frances did not accept this gentleman's disaster as a warning, kindly intended by Providence, for she thought herself better than any member of the South Daleshire.

'Some wretched stockbroker from London, I dare say,' she said to herself, as she steered her horse cautiously through the trees.

He got down the bank cleverly enough, but for some inexplicable reason chose to take objection to the water, and made a frantic rush for the opposite side. Here again there were trees and brushwood, and caution was needful ; but caution is unavailing with a horse gone suddenly mad. He made a wild bound out of the stream, dashed up the slippery bank, knocked his rider's head against a tree, and then rolled back into the water.

'Please somebody see that my horse isn't hurt,' cried Frances, as Morton pulled her out of her saddle, a dripping Diana, and then, stunned by the blow against the tree, she fainted in Mr. Blake's arms.

Happily his horse was strong enough to carry them both up the bank, while Lady Frances's thoroughbred struggled up on the other side, very

little the worse for his bad behaviour, and was caught by Beville's groom, who had just come quietly up on his master's second horse.

The hounds were half over the next field by this time, and Morton was alone with Lady Frances, the groom looking at them with an air of respectful imperturbability from the opposite bank, as who should say, 'If she's dead I can't help it, and if she's alive I'm ready to obey orders. A hunting field is no place for the display of emotion.'

'I think we're out of it,' Morton said to himself, as he pulled up his horse, and stood with Frances in his arms, waiting for her to come to herself.

He remembered in the next moment that he had some brandy in his hunting flask, but before he could put the bottle to her lips, Lady Frances revived a little, opened her eyes, and looked dreamily about her.

'Where are the hounds?' she asked, not immediately aware of her somewhat singular position upon somebody else's horse.

'I'm afraid they're in the next county. Would you mind taking a little brandy? I'm sure you must be giddy and ill.'

‘I feel as if I were in a merry-go-round,’ answered Lady Frances. ‘No, thank you ; I couldn’t possibly do it,’ as he offered his brandy flask. ‘Good gracious! Where’s my horse?’

‘On the other side of the river. Don’t be frightened—your groom has got him. The brute isn’t hurt.’

‘I’m glad of that. I don’t mind being smashed a little myself, but I wouldn’t have Primus hurt for all the world, or at least as much of it as I’m entitled to.’

‘Primus! Is that his name?’

‘*Facile primus*. Beville christened him. I believe it’s about all the Latin he knows.’

She slipped out of Morton’s arms, and dropped lightly to the ground, looking as bright as if nothing had happened, though she was very pale, and her habit was streaming with water, and plastered with clay.

‘Are you sure Primus is all right, Brooks?’ she called to the groom.

‘Yes, my lady, he’s right enough, more shame for him.’

‘Do you think we could catch them?’ she asked Morton.

‘You are a better judge than I am, but I am sure you ought not to ride any further to-day.’

‘Perhaps you are right. My head is a little painful,’ she said, putting her hand to her forehead. I suppose it’s the effect of the tree.’

‘There’s a farmhouse on the Blackford Road, not half a mile off,’ said Morton, who had dismounted before this. ‘If you will let me put you on my horse, and lead him there, your groom could go back to Blatchmardean and send a carriage for you.’

‘That seems an awfully spoony thing to do,’ said Frances, ‘and it’s rather too bad that I should keep you out of all the fun.’

‘I don’t care a straw about the fun. I only want to take care of you.’

She was feeling faint and sick, and inclined rather to lie down on the grass, and let the world go by her than to make any kind of effort. So she allowed Morton to settle the matter for her, whereupon he tied up one stirrup, shortened the other, and mounted the lady on his own horse.

‘We’re going to Dawley’s Farm,’ he called to the groom; ‘you can go back to Blatchmardean, and send a carriage to fetch your mistress.’

‘What am I to do about Lord Beville’s horse?’ asked the groom.

‘Do the best you can.’

The man went away dispirited. He had been going across country in his best style, though he was supposed to have been nursing his master’s second horse in such a manner as to deliver up an unexhausted animal when the day’s work was half over, and now he had to trot quietly back to Blatchmardean, leading the guilty Primus.



## CHAPTER XVIII.

### LINK BY LINK.

HOLBROOK FARM, with its low gray homestead, on the Blackford Road, belonged to the Blatchmardean estate, which would have been a fine property had it not been encumbered with the mortgages of a spendthrift race. The farmhouse, on this bright wintry day, had that air of unearthly quiet which such places are apt to wear in the early afternoon.

Morton led his charge in at the wide gateway, and round the gravelled sweep to the moss-grown old porch. There was an old-fashioned garden in front of the house, more useful than ornamental, and in the rear there were barns and rickyards which dwarfed the low, irregular homestead. On one side spread level pastures, on the other there was an orchard, bounded by a ploughed field. Everything had a look of Sunday afternoon repose. The sound of the horse's hoofs plish-plashing on the soft road

seemed almost a startling interruption of the all-pervading peace.

‘The place looks as if there was not a living creature within call,’ said Morton; ‘but I suppose we shall unearth somebody if we try very hard.’

He pulled an iron ring which hung from a rusty chain in the porch, and far away at the back of the premises there sounded the cling-clang of a hoarse and feeble bell. After waiting two or three minutes he repeated this operation, but without any effect whatever. So he bethought himself that his own lungs might be stronger than the decrepid old bell, and he gave a stentorian shout of ‘House!’ This set a bass dog and a tenor dog barking in an excited duet, which momentarily increased in vehemence; whereupon came the sound of pattens clicking along a stone passage, and the door was opened by a ruddy-cheeked, plump, wholesome female, smelling of the dairy.

‘Did you please to ring, sir?’ she inquired, and then seeing Lady Frances on the horse, she exclaimed, ‘Lord bless us and keep us, if it isn’t my lord’s daughter, looking as white as a curd.’

‘Yes, it is I, Mrs. Dawley,’ answered Frances, slipping off her masculine saddle and alighting on the gravel path, where Morton supported her with one arm while he held the somewhat fidgety horse with the other. ‘I’ve had something in the way of a fall, as you may see from the state of my habit. I’ve come to ask for your hospitality until the carriage from Blatchmardean fetches me.’

‘Lor, my lady, you’re free and welcome to anything this house holds. You must have some dry clothes first thing, if you’ll be so kind as to step upstairs with me. My gowns won’t fit you, my lady, but dry things are better than wet things any day.’

Lady Frances hesitated, and looked down at her habit.

‘Do you think it matters?’ she asked. ‘I’ve had a ducking before to-day, and I dare say the carriage will be here in half-an-hour.’

‘My dear Fanny, don’t be foolish!’ expostulated Morton. ‘Unless you have an ardent desire for an attack of pleurisy or rheumatic fever, you’d better accept this good woman’s offer.’

‘My clothes are homely, my lady, but they’re clean,’ said Mrs. Dawley.

‘My good soul, do you suppose I don’t know that? Well, if you don’t mind the trouble of lending me a gown, I suppose I’d better get off this wet habit. I begin to feel rather shivery.’

‘Phœbe,’ called the matron, whereat a red-haired damsel, with bare arms and canvas apron, issued from the back premises. ‘Just set a light to the fire in the best parlour, and put the kettle on in the kitchen. Perhaps you’ll be so good as to step into the parlour, sir, while my lady changes her clothes.’

‘With pleasure,’ answered Morton, ‘if you’ll kindly allow somebody to take care of my horse.’

‘Phœbe, just you run and call Bill to take the gentleman’s horse round to the stable.’

Mrs. Dawley opened the door of a large, low sitting-room, and ushered in Morton, having already made up her mind that he was Lady Frances Grange’s ‘young man.’ Had he not called her his dear Fanny, and assumed a tone of authority which

no ordinary acquaintance would venture to use towards an earl's daughter?

Upstairs in the lavender-scented, dimity-curtained bedroom Frances made her hasty toilet, laughing a good deal the while at the absurdity of the situation, though she was still so weak and giddy that it was as much as she could do to stand without Mrs. Dawley's help. With the aid of that hospitable matron she contrived to array herself in a starched white petticoat and a gaudy printed flannel morning gown, which Mrs. Dawley informed her had been her sitting-up dress after the birth of her last baby.

'Dawley saw the stuff at the draper's in High-clere, one market day, and took a fancy to it because it was a cheerful pattern,' she explained.

Lady Frances smiled at her image in the glass, her pallid face made whiter by the orange, and blue, and red in the cheerful-patterned dressing-gown. There was a tasselled girdle with which she was able to tighten that ample garment round her slim waist.

'I'll have your habit dried and brushed by the time you want to go home, my lady, so you needn't be afraid of having to go back to your pa looking an

object,' said the farmer's wife. 'And now your ladyship must have some refreshment, something warm and comforting. I should say that the best thing you could take would be half a tumbler of brandy and water, hot, sweet, and strong.'

'My dear soul, not for the world.'

'A glass of sherry wine negus, then?'

'Please, if I am to have anything, let it be a cup of tea.'

'Of course, my lady, if your ladyship likes. Will you come down to the sitting-room and rest a bit on the sofa, or would you like to lay down on the spare bed and take a little nap?'

'No, thank you, Mrs. Dawley, I feel too excited to sleep. I'm so vexed at having lost the run. I think I'd better go downstairs and tell Mr. Blake that he needn't stay. There's not the least need for him to stop now that I am in such comfortable quarters.'

'Lor, my lady, he'll stop, you may be sure. He won't want to go away,' said Mrs. Dawley, with a grin that was like a burst of sunshine.

Frances went slowly downstairs, holding the

banister-rail as she went, and feeling very faint and tottery. Morton was standing at the window, looking out at the wintry landscape. There was a cheerful fire of turf and wood in the capacious grate. The farm-house parlour, with its drab wainscot and gay chintz curtains, had a pleasant old-world aspect. Mrs. Dawley came bustling in with the tea-tray, and began to lay the table with a homespun cloth, on which she set forth her best teapot, her old Staffordshire cups and saucers, a home-made loaf, a dish of golden-tinted butter, and a substantial cut-and-come-again plum cake.

‘Now, Morton, I want you to go about your business immediately,’ said Frances, settling herself in the roomy chintz-covered arm-chair by the fire. ‘Mrs. Dawley will take care of me till the carriage comes from Blatchmardean. If you ride cleverly you may manage to fall in with the hounds.’

‘Thank you, Fanny, I know when I am well off,’ replied Morton, smiling at her. ‘I am not going to pound over half the county in a futile endeavour to come up with the hounds. I had much rather sit

by this comfortable fire and enjoy a dish of Mrs. Dawley's tea.'

The farmer's wife, busy with the arrangement of her tea-table, heard this conversation, and made up her mind that Lady Frances's young man was all that a lover should be.

'But it seems too absurd that you should waste your day in dancing attendance upon me,' said Frances, sipping her tea, when Mrs. Dawley had replenished the bright wood fire, and left her visitors to themselves.

'I see nothing absurd in the matter, and it is rather advantageous to me. I have been out of gear for my ordinary pursuits of late, haven't been able to "frame" to anything, as the Lancashire folks say; and it is a relief to me to waste a few hours in cheerful society.'

Frances remembered the time when he had spent the greater part of his leisure in her company, and wondered if it seemed strange to him to renew the old easy-going companionship, as if it were a dropped thread in the fabric of his life, which he was trying to take up again.



‘Why do you never bring Dulcie to see me?’ she asked. ‘I am not able to invite her in a formal way, for you know that my father sets his face against all ceremonious entertainments, for the simple reason that he can’t afford them. We had to make our choice between stables and general society; and as we are all much fonder of horses than of the ruck of our fellow-creatures, we chose stables. But so far as five o’clock tea goes, I am allowed to be as hospitable as I like: and I believe Beville can always give his friends Apollinaris or St. Galmier. You might bring Dulcie to Blatchmardean now and then to waste an afternoon with me. I know that it is a dull, shabby old place.’

‘It is a dear old place,’ protested Morton; ‘some of the happiest hours of my life were spent there.’

‘You must not say that.’

‘Yes, I must. Do you suppose a man does not know what happiness means until he falls in love? I may have found out another and more intense happiness since those days, but why should I not admit that those days were very happy?’

Frances did not argue the point. She felt a

curious gladness at the idea that he had once taken pleasure in her company—that those idle hours at Blatchmardean had been sweet to him, though perhaps not so sweet to him as they had been to her, nor yet so dear to look back upon. She was silent for a little while, watching the burning wood as it blazed and reddened, and crumbled away into white ashes. It seemed almost an emblem of life and love—a passionate flame—the deep red glow of feeling—and then coldness and pallid ashes.

‘Do you remember how you used to lecture me in those juvenile days of mine?’ asked Frances presently. ‘I am sure I deserved it, for I know I must have been an unmitigated hoyden.’

‘If I did presume to lecture the process must have been beneficial, for I’m sure nobody could find fault with you now,’ said Morton, smiling at her as she lay back in her deep arm-chair, with the pretty boyish head reclining against the chintz cushion.

‘Now, Morton, if you talk like that I shall know that our friendship is at an end,’ she remonstrated. ‘If I am to believe that you retain the least vestige of your brotherly regard for your friend’s sister you

must go on lecturing. Tiny tells me that you strongly disapprove of a woman hunting.'

'Tiny takes my particular objection for a general one. I certainly did object to the idea of Tiny riding Butterfly to hounds; partly out of regard for the mare, and, perhaps—'

'Be truthful, now, Morton, or you will sink fathoms deep in my respect.'

'Perhaps a little because I think that a girl who has not been, as it were, born in the hunting field, may as well keep out of it altogether. But for a girl who rides as you do, and who has been brought up as you have—'

'One-third in the nursery, and two-thirds in the stable and saddle-room. Yes, I understand, Morton—for me it is different. I am outside the pale.'

'How can you say such things, Fanny?'

'How can I help thinking them, and what does it matter whether I say them or leave them unsaid? They are true. I must pay the penalty for having been brought up with a brother for my only companion—loving the sports he loves—caring for none of the things that other girls care for—'

having few feminine vanities, and fewer feminine virtues.'

'My dear Fanny, you must know, in your heart of hearts, that you are charming, and that there are plenty of men in the world who would rave about you!'

'Yes, but they are just the kind of men I should detest. I hope you don't suppose because I adore horses that I like horsey men. The quadruped is all that is admirable; but I draw the line at the biped.'

'And no doubt you will have your reward. Some man who is the very reverse of horsey—who never jumped so much as a gully—some grave young senator or enthusiastic scientist will fall over head and ears in love with my pretty Fanny, and wean her heart from stables and saddle-room.'

'When that bright particular star appears on my horizon I will let you know,' answered Fanny. 'If my poor Primus had broken his back to-day I don't think I should ever have hunted again,' she went on musingly. 'I never could have got over his death.'

Mrs. Dawley came in with more logs and more turf to replenish the fire. She had changed her gown

in honour of her visitor, and had put on a smart cap.

‘I hope you are feeling better by this time, my lady,’ she said.

‘I am feeling as well as I ever felt in my life, except that I am dreadfully savage with myself for being out of what I know will be described to me as the very best run of the season. It always is when one isn’t in it.’

‘Lor, my lady, but you’ve had so many of ’em, one more or less can’t count. You’ve got quite a pretty collection of foxes’ tails hanging up in your boodwower, I’ll be bound.’

‘I never saw a fox’s tail in my life, Mrs. Dawley,’ answered Frances gravely, ‘but when I was a child the huntsman gave me a brush or two. He left off doing so ages ago, when the business began to get monotonous. Now, please, sit down, and make yourself at home in your own parlour, and let us have a chat.’

‘I’m sure I shall be too pleased, my lady, if I don’t intrude.’

‘My dear soul, how *can* you intrude in your own parlour?’

‘Circumstances alter cases, my lady, and I hope I know what’s due to my lord’s daughter.’

‘If you are so ceremonious I shall think you have forgotten the days when Beville and I used to camp out on Ailsa Common, and used to come here for cream and eggs and butter for our gipsy tea.’

‘I remember it all as well as if it was yesterday, my lady—two rare young pickles you was, begging your ladyship’s pardon—regular young Turks.’

‘Ah, I see you have not forgotten,’ said Frances. ‘Now do sit in that nice chair by the fire, and tell me all the news of the neighbourhood. What is there going on just now—courtships, marriages, deaths, and burials?’

‘Well, my lady, there ain’t much,’ replied Mrs. Dawley, smoothing her black silk apron, and seating herself with ceremonious stiffness in the chair opposite Lady Frances, Morton having wheeled his own chair round to make room for her. ‘I did think we should have had a funeral this side of Christmas, for Farmer Briarwood’s asthma seemed as if it was coming to a head: but he do linger and linger, poor soul, and I shouldn’t be surprised if he was to last till the March brewings. It’s a dead-and-alive place,

this, my lady, neighbours few and far between, you see; and there ain't much doing any time, except at harvest homes, and such like. The only thing folks have been talking about lately has been this trial for murder at Highclere.'

Frances was going to stop her, but Morton gave her a look and put his finger to his lips, as much as to say, 'Let her go on.'

'Oh, your neighbours talk of the trial, do they?' he said, in an encouraging tone.

'Yes, sir, they do. You see it's such a queer story altogether, a man giving himself up after twenty years. It's only natural folks should talk about it. My master was at the trial—he said you might have heard a pin drop, in particular when the lawyer was questioning Sir Everard Courtenay, asking him the most cutting questions about his poor dead wife, just as if he was the lowest day-labourer in the land, instead of one of the leading gentry. Them lawyers didn't ought to be allowed such licence, I say. It was a shame to bring Lady Courtenay's name into it, after she's been lying in her grave these twenty years.'

‘You speak as if you felt a particular interest in Lady Courtenay,’ said Morton, intent upon the woman’s every word. ‘Did you know her?’

‘No, sir, I can’t say that I did; but I’ve seen her driving through Highclere on a market day when I used to go there to do my shopping. She was the prettiest woman I ever saw in my life; but there was something delicate, what you might call vanishing like, about her, as made one think she wasn’t long for this world. I used to hear a great deal about her years ago when I was a young woman, and when she was Miss Alice Rothney; for my father kept the shop in the village next Templewood, Lord George Rothney’s seat, and my first cousin, Lucy Stevens, was in service there. She was own maid to the three Miss Rothneys, and she had a pretty hard place, for Lord George wasn’t rich, and didn’t keep any more cats than could catch mice, I can tell you, my lady. Miss Alice was so fond of our Lucy that when she married Sir Everard Courtenay nothing would do but Lucy must go abroad with her as her maid, and she was with her till the poor young lady’s death, which happened, as you must have heard, my lady, within a year of her



marriage, and on the very night after Mr. Blake's murder. Ah! that was a black night for Austhorpe, and well might the church bell be set tolling at midnight. I've heard Austhorpe people speak of it many a time. It was a clear, frosty night, and the bell was heard for miles round, scaring the children and the old folks in their beds. There were some that woke up startled, thinking it was the end of the world, and the bell calling them to judgment!

Mrs. Dawley dwelt on these gloomy memories with a ghoulish gusto, as she sat blinking at the cheerful fire and enjoying the unusual luxury of repose in the middle of the afternoon.

'Is your cousin still living?' inquired Morton.

'Well, sir, she is, and when you've said that you've said all,' returned Mrs. Dawley, 'for a weaker, sicklier, more fretful creature to be alive you could hardly find between here and London. And yet she was a bright, pretty-looking girl enough when she was at Templewood. But after Lady Courtenay's death she took to wandering like, and went from place to place, a regular rolling stone, and then when she was thirty-three years of age and ought to have

known better she took and married a young man in the musical line, and there they are starving genteelly in a back street at Avonmore. He keeps a music shop, and tunes pianos, when he can get any to tune, and plays the cornet at concerts and balls, and even circuses, when he can get employed; and she does a little millinery, and between them they might do pretty well, I dare say, if he wasn't wild and rackety in his ways, but as it is they just manage to keep the wolf from the door. My husband's very good, and lets me send poor Lucy a well-filled hamper once a quarter or so; and I don't suppose they ever have a real good satisfying dinner except when they get one of my legs of pork and a pair of my barn-door fowls.'

'What is the musical gentleman's name?' asked Morton, as if with a polite desire to keep up the conversation.

Frances had lapsed into a dreamy state, and sat looking idly at the fire.

'His name is Green, sir, Charles Churchill Green; though it's my private opinion that he has no better right to call himself Churchill than I have to call myself Nebuchadnezzar,' answered Mrs. Dawley,

bridling a little as she smoothed her apron, 'and a precious deal he thinks of himself. As my husband says, in his witty way, you might turn a pretty penny if you could buy him at your price and sell him at his own. When he married our Lucy he pretended that his father was a gentleman of property in London, but Lucy found out afterwards that his property was a livery-yard in Lambeth, and that he'd been bankrupt three times. The airs this Churchill gives himself, all on the strength of a slim figure, a small foot, and rather a pretty talent for music ! And he's such a flighty and flirty young fellow, that poor Lucy's life has been a misery to her ever since she married him. But, as my husband says, in his deep, far-seeing way, " as you make your bed so you must lie upon it." '

' Does your cousin ever pay you a visit here ?'

' Well, no, she's never been since her marriage. First and foremost, if she was to leave Green to his own devices for a week or two she'd be miserable all the time, taking it into her head that he was going to elope with a countess, or something of that kind ; for she thinks there never was such a man as that

blessed husband of hers, and that the highest ladies in Avonmore are ready to fall in love with him; secondly, because Dawley don't like doleful people, and poor Lucy has been all in the miseries ever since she married. So you see, as it's my first duty to please my husband, I don't ask her, though I dare say our fine country air and good living would freshen her up a bit. Once in a way, when I've got a leisure day, and the gig-horse isn't wanted for the plough, I drive over to Avonmore and take a cup of tea with her, and hear her talk of her troubles, and I know that does her good.'

'Don't you think the carriage ought to have been here by this time?' asked Frances, to whom the conversation had become somewhat uninteresting. 'Brooks must have got to Blatchmardean an hour and a half ago, unless he absolutely crawled. I think I'd better put on my habit, Mrs. Dawley, if it's nearly dry.'

'I'm afraid it won't be anything like dry yet awhile, my lady,' said the farmer's wife, 'though it's hanging as near the kitchen fire as I could venture to put it.'

'Perhaps your people will have the sense to send

you over some clothes,' said Morton. 'Brooks knew you had been in the water.'

'And Brooks is a nice fatherly man. Yes, I dare say they'll send me some dry garments, and I can take my habit home in a bundle. An ignominious close to an ignominious day, isn't it, Morton?'

'You can afford to end ignominiously for once in your life. You have had a long career of triumphs.'

'Barren honours, worthless laurels!' exclaimed Frances, with a laugh that was half sad, half cynical.

There came the sound of carriage wheels as she spoke, and she sprang out of her deep chair to run to the window.

'Yes, here is the brougham, and my good old Moulty, I declare; and now, Morton, you may consider your duty at an end, so you can mount your horse, and ride away. I hope you don't hate me for having caused you to waste a day.'

'I never spent a day less wastefully,' answered Morton gravely.

'How solemn you look as you say that! Well, it

is a very pretty compliment to Mrs. Dawley and me, especially Mrs. Dawley, for I'm sure she has done the best part of the talking. Here comes Miss Moulton with a carpet-bag; and now, if I may go up to your room once more, Mrs. Dawley, I'll get ready to go home.'

She ran out of the room, and almost tumbled into the arms of a stout, comfortable-looking, middle-aged woman, who had come to Blatchmardean eleven years ago as Lady Frances Grange's governess, and who stayed there now as the girl's guide, philosopher, and friend. She had striven conscientiously to teach so long as Frances would consent to be taught; she had tried to stock her pupil's mind with the most solid goods in the way of information; she had laboured assiduously to impart languages, and histories, and ologies, but all her efforts in the teaching line had been futile, and Fanny had hardly learnt anything from her governess except a sincere respect and love for that worthy person.

'You dear! how good of you to come!' cried Frances. 'Come upstairs, and I'll tell you my adventures while I change my gown.'

‘My darling, they told me you had been half drowned.’

‘Only ducked, Curly, dear; drowned is far too dignified a word.’

She had surnamed her governess Curly on the strength of two bunches of old-fashioned ringlets which shaded Miss Moulton’s plump cheeks.

‘Isn’t the word a little vulgar?’

‘Of course, dear. Haven’t I a natural leaning that way?’ asked Frances gaily.

Morton went out to look for his horse while Frances was dressing, and having ordered that animal to be in readiness for him, he walked up and down the gravel path in front of the house, waiting to hand Lady Frances into her carriage before he rode off. He was impatient to be gone, and it seemed to him that the lady was unduly long at her toilet.

‘Here is a leaf in the book of the past,’ he said to himself, reflecting upon what he had heard from Mrs. Dawley.

## CHAPTER XIX.

### BLATCHMARDEAN CASTLE.

THE visitor who came to Blatchmardean for the first time was apt to be reminded of the castle of the sleeping beauty in the wood. There was an air of neglect about everything, except the stable, which was suggestive of a century's slumber. There was the stillness of a house in which every one was steeped in an after-dinner nap. There were more cobwebs than are generally permitted in the waking world. More dust lay in the disused reception rooms than was consistent with the dignity of a waking earl's household. The wide-spreading park that screened the castle from the outside world had grown and thickened since the present Lord Blatchmardean had come into his own. He loved the old beeches that he had climbed and birdnested in as a boy ; he loved the young oaks that he had seen planted ; and sorely as he had sometimes needed the



money those trees might have brought him, Lord Blatchmardean had been strictly conservative of the timber on his estate. He was indeed in all things a moderate man, living moderately, taking his pleasure in few and simple things, fond of his horse and dog and gun, loving to potter about the sixty or seventy acres which he reserved for his own cultivation, and fancying himself a shining light in modern agriculture.

He was a harmless, well-meaning man, and had never been known to deal hardly with his children, seldom even to speak harshly to them. He had let them grow up very much as they liked, exacting little from them, and giving the least he could. He had just contrived to find the money for Beville's education at Rugby and Christchurch; but that young nobleman had not been able to indulge in any of those expensive follies which are, as it were, the rosebuds that University youth gathers while it may, no matter how many thorns it may find sticking in its fingers after the rosebuds are faded. Beville and his sister were fond of their father in their own characteristic way—talking of him lightly as the

Pater, the Sheik, the Ancient Mariner, or by any other title which a frivolous fancy suggested to them ; but of that deep and serious love which goes hand in hand with reverence they had no idea. Such love as Dulcie felt for her father was not within the compass of these lighter natures. They were faithful to the old earl, after their fashion, and would have resented any disrespect offered to him by an outsider; and this familiar, easy-going affection being Lord Blatchmardean's highest idea of filial piety, he was thoroughly satisfied with the tribute offered to him. He loved and praised his children, and had no eye for their faults and shortcomings.

Beville was the dearest boy in the world, and the best shot in the shire; Fan sat her horse to perfection, and had the lightest hands that ever steered a fretful hunter across country. That either boy or girl needed higher accomplishments or a wider culture had never entered into Lord Blatchmardean's head.

The sleepy old castle was a curious mixture of ancient splendour, neglect, forlornness, and modern comfort. There were spacious suites of rooms that

had not been used for fifty years, and which the housemaids, reluctant, and yawning at their profitless work, visited at long intervals with their brooms and brushes, scaring spiders that had grown bloated in undisturbed plenty, and setting vagabond mice scrambling and scuffling in their warren behind the panelling—grand old rooms, in which stately banquets and receptions had been held in days gone by, and where, a few years ago, Beville and his sister had played hide-and-seek in the dusky winter afternoons. Seldom did any one, save the house-keeper and housemaids, or now and then an inquisitive tourist who forced his way into the house, enter those rooms now. Lord Blatchmardean and his son and daughter lived in a nest of quaint, low-ceiled parlours opening into an old Dutch garden, and had their bedchambers and private dens in the corresponding rooms on the floor above; leaving all the stately part of the house to the rats, and mice, and cobwebs, and housemaids, except the big central hall, which was used as a billiard-room and general lounge by Lady Frances and the two gentlemen, and served also as a smoking-room for

Beville and the few friends whom he occasionally entertained at Blatchmardean.

Shabby and faded though the house was, it was not without interest and picturesqueness. The fine stone hall, with its huge fire-place, the wide staircase leading to the echoing gallery above, the vaulted roof, whence hung ragged silken banners that told of days when Grange was a name known in the lists of chivalry; the grim old portraits, the antique furniture, all had a charm that belongs to things that have a history. The contrast between the spacious splendour of the disused rooms and the cosy comfort and snugness of the garden parlours, had a piquant effect; and people who came to Blatchmardean for the first time, after being chilled and awed by deserted banquet halls, and mouldy withdrawing-rooms, were delighted with the sunny sitting-rooms facing south, papered with birds and butterflies, bright with chintz hangings and odds and ends of old china, and deliciously rococo cabinets and tea tables. Lady Frances and her governess had arranged the rooms between them, nine years ago,

and it had been Miss Moulton's favourite task ever since to keep them in exquisite order; and this office of hers was by no means a sinecure as Frances was the most harum-scarum and untidy of girls, and left litter and confusion behind her wherever she went.

'I wonder what would become of you all if I were not here,' asked Miss Moulton, as she bustled about the little drawing-room, shutting up workboxes, tidying bookstands, and arranging writing tables. 'I really think you and Lord Beville are the most littery young people in the world.'

'Littery instead of literary,' cried Frances. 'It's only a difference of a letter or two. What would become of us, Curly, if you were to go away? Why, in the first place we should expire of grief in less than a week, and in the second Blatchmardean would be a pigsty before the end of a fortnight. I am like Hamlet, don't you know, dear? I wasn't born to set things right.'

'You are not quoting correctly, Frances.'

'Of course not. I never do. I always adapt

my quotations to suit my text. Is not that what they do in the newspapers?’

Sarah Moulton shrugged her plump shoulders, and gave a little laugh. She was much too fond of Frances to be severe. As long as the lessons had lasted she had done her uttermost to be strict with her pupil. She had insisted on having the correct date of Julius Cæsar’s assassination—the right number of petals for each order of plants—the exact constituents of conglomerate—the precise place of old red sandstone in the geological scale. But now it was all over. On her eighteenth birthday Lady Frances had shut up her books and vowed that she would learn no more. She was finished—she was to make her curtsy at St. James’s, under the wing of Lady Luffington, her maternal aunt, at the first drawing-room.

‘I am an emancipated young woman,’ she exclaimed, ‘and I shall never learn any more.’

‘I should be puzzled to know how much you have learned,’ said Miss Moulton.

‘Take it the other way, Curly sweet, and be content with knowing how little. I never did take

kindly to the Pierian spring, did I, dear? Perhaps I didn't drink deep enough to enjoy it.'

'And now I suppose I had better look out for a new situation,' said Miss Moulton.

'Sarah Moulton, alias Curly, alias Sally, alias the dearest woman in the world, how can you ask such a heartless question?' said Frances, with her arms round the good soul's neck. 'Yes, I know I'm rumpling your collar, but I can't help it. How can you talk of leaving us? Don't you know you're a kind of adopted aunt, one of those indulgent maiden aunts one reads of in story books—that Beville adores you—as he ought, considering that you've spoiled him abominably—that the earl looks up to you as the prop of his house—now, Sally, it is quite too bad of you.'

'My darling,' exclaimed Miss Moulton, betwixt laughing and crying, 'you ought to know that I have no higher wish than to end my days with you.'

'Well, I hope I do know it, Moulty dear; but when you talked of a new situation you staggered me.'

‘My love, I thought that if you were to leave off trying to improve your mind, I should be useless here.’

‘Useless! Why, you are useful in a thousand ways. You are the keystone of our domestic arch. We should tumble to pieces without you.’

Thus it was that Miss Moulton remained at the castle after her pupil’s education was nominally finished. In her conscientiousness she strove even now to cultivate Lady Frances’s mind, ungrateful though the soil might be, and was perpetually scattering intellectual seed, in the shape of stray scraps of information, which might or might not germinate in due season.

Miss Moulton had felt deeply disappointed when Morton Blake announced his engagement to Dulcie. She had long cherished the hope of seeing her beloved pupil happily married to a man of high principles and respectable position in the county. Morton Blake, with his plebeian ancestry, and moderate estate, would not have been a brilliant match for the daughter of a wealthy earl; but he would have been an eligible husband for a girl whose



father had as much as he could do to maintain his sorely-shrunk establishment, and to keep out of debt. Carefully as Frances had hidden the secrets of her wounded heart, even from the loving eye of her governess, Miss Moulton knew that the heart had been wounded, that underneath the lightness, and even recklessness, of Fanny's character, there existed the capacity for deepest feeling. The good woman was angry with Morton for his coldness, his dulness—angry with him that he could have lived in closest friendship with so lovable a being, and yet have withheld his love. Little spurts of angry feeling flashed out of her now and then in her talk about Morton, whereupon Frances always took up the cudgels in his behalf.

‘I can't think why you are so hard upon him, Moulty,’ she would say. ‘I'm sure he is always respectful, and altogether nice in his manner to you.’

‘My dear, the man is a gentleman. I am not going to deny that. But I shall always think that he made a convenience of Blatchmardean Castle—coming here two or three afternoons a week, and wasting your time idling about the gardens.’

‘I should have wasted it for myself, Curly dear, if he hadn’t done it for me.’

‘And now that he is engaged to Miss Courtenay we are to consider ourselves honoured if he calls once a month.’

‘I don’t think he has any idea of honouring us, Curly love. Of course all his leisure now is devoted to Dulcie.’

‘A man should be loyal to friendship even if he choose to fall in love. What Morton can have seen in Miss Courtenay I have never been able to fathom.’

‘Haven’t you really, my Moulty? Why, first and foremost he must have seen out and away the loveliest girl in this part of the world. And then Dulcie is altogether sweet and lovable. She is accomplished, too—plays exquisitely, paints admirably, has read more books than I have ever seen the outside of. Why, Moulty, she is a pearl of girls, and you know it. I think Morton is very lucky to have won her.’

‘Well, my love, if you are satisfied I suppose I ought to be content,’ said Miss Moulton with a sigh.

Frances laughed, and ran off to the stable with her apron full of bread for the horses, and presently she stood leaning her cheek against the shoulder of her favourite brown, in the dusk of a large loose box, while some slow tears crept down her cheek.

‘Satisfied,’ she repeated to herself. ‘Yes, I am satisfied that the only man I ever cared for had never a thought for me; that after knowing every secret of my soul, except one, after being for five years my chief friend and counsellor, he could coolly turn his back upon me and give his love to another girl. It is hard to bear, and you make it a little harder for me, sometimes, Moulty, without knowing it.’

END OF VOL. I.

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